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LONDONERS

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HICHENS



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THE LONDONERS

THE LONDONERS

BY

ROBERT HICHENS

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NATIVE MAN," "THE FOLLY OF EUSTACE," ETC.

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THE LONDONERS

CHAPTER I

"NOT ELLIMAN"

Mrs. Verulam came into her drawing-room slowly and rather wearily. It was a sultry afternoon in May—indeed, the papers were quite in a ferment about the exceptional heat-wave that was passing over London; and a premature old general, anxious apparently to be up to time, had just died of tropical apoplexy in Park Lane. Possibly it was the weather that had painted the pallor on Mrs. Verulam's exceedingly pretty face. Beneath her mist of yellow hair her dark-gray eyes looked out pathetically, with the sort of pathos that means nothing in particular—the grace of an indefinite sorrow. She was clad in a pale-pink tea-gown, elaborately embroidered in dull green and gold, and she was followed by her maid, the faithful Marriner, whose hands were full of bright-coloured cushions. The windows of the drawing-room, which faced Park Lane, and commanded a distant view of the Parade on Sunday mornings, stood open, and striped awnings defied the sunbeams above them. London hummed gently in the heat; and an admiral in the next house but one might almost be heard ordering his valet, with many terrible expressions of the sea, to get out his ducks, and be quick about it.

"Oh, Marriner!" said Mrs. Verulam, in the voice

which all self-respecting men worshipped and compared with Sarah Bernhardt's—"oh, Marriner, how terribly hot is it!"

"The heat is severe, ma'am, for the season of the year," replied Marriner.

Mrs. Verulam sat down on an immense sofa near the window, and Marriner proceeded to bank her up with cushions. She glanced into a tiny hand-mirror which hung by a silver chain at her side.

"I am as pale as a Pierrot," she murmured.

"I beg pardon, ma'am."

"Pierrot, Marriner, is the legendary emblem of—but it is too hot for history."

Marriner, who was ever athirst for information, looked disappointed. She had been on the eve of improving her mind, but the heat precluded the sweet processes of further education, so the poor soul was downcast. She bit her lip, secretly imitating a well-known actor whom she worshipped, and wondered why life is so full of misery. Mrs. Verulam lay back on the cushions and glanced wearily around. Her eyes fell upon an oval table that stood near by. Various notes and cards lay on it, and an immense bouquet of dull-red roses.

"What is all that?" she asked, with a fatigued gesture towards the table.

Marriner wheeled it forward till it stood beside the sofa, then she lifted the bouquet and turned it in her hands.

"From Mr. Hyacinth Rodney, ma'am," she said.

A thin smile curved Mrs. Verulam's lips. She took the flowers, glanced at their dusky beauty, touched their velvet petals with her fingers, then laid them down carelessly.

"They are remarkably fine specimens, ma'am," said Marriner. "I often think——" she checked herself.

"Yes, Marriner; what do you think?"

"That we are like the flowers, ma'am; we fade and die so soon."

"Dear me, Marriner, what original thoughts you have!"

"I can't help them coming, ma'am. They seem to take me like a storm, ma'am."

"Oh! more cards: General and Mrs. Le Mesurier, Lord Simeon, the Prince and Princess of Galilee—what curious names people are born with!—Mr. Marchington. Why will so many people call?"

"I think they wish to see you, ma'am."

"I know. But that's just it, Marriner; that is the problem."

"I like problems, ma'am."

"Then resolve me this one. Why do people with immortal souls spend their lives in leaving tiny oblongs of pasteboard on other people with immortal souls whom they scarcely know and do n't care a straw about? Why do they do it, Marriner?"

"Might I speak, ma'am?"

"I ask you to."

"I do n't feel convinced that their souls are immortal, ma'am. I have my doubts, ma'am."

"Then you are in the fashion. But that makes it all the more strange. If we have only one life, Marriner, why should we waste it in leaving cards?"

"Very true, ma'am."

A certain excitement had crept into Mrs. Verulam's gray eyes. She raised herself on her cushions dramatically.

"Marriner, we are fools!" she cried; "that is why we

do it. That is why we do a thousand things that bore us—a thousand things that bore other people. Give me all those notes."

Marriner collected the envelopes which lay upon the table and handed them respectfully to her mistress. Mrs. Verulam tore them open one by one.

" 'To have the honour to meet the Prince and Princess of——.' 'Lady Emily Crane at home; conjuring and acrobats. Eleven o'clock.' 'Mr. Pettingham at home; the Unattached Club. Views of the Holy Land and a lecture. Supper, midnight.' 'Lady Clondart at home. Dancing. Eleven o'clock.' 'Mrs. Vigors at home. Sartorius will exhibit his performing panthers. Ten o'clock.' 'Sir Algernon Smith at home. The Grafton Galleries. Madame Melba will sing. Eleven o'clock.' 'Mrs. ——' Oh! I can't open any more. Heavens! are we human, Marriner? Are we thinking, sentient beings that we live this life of absurdity? Acrobats, conjurors, the Holy Land, panthers, Melba. Thus do we deliberately complicate our existence, already so complicated, whether we will or no. Ah, it is intolerable! The season is a disease. London is a vast lunatic asylum."

"Oh, ma'am!"

"And we, who call ourselves the smart world, are the incurable patients. Give me something to read. Let me try to forget where I am and what I am."

She lay back trembling. Marriner handed her the *World*. She opened it, and her eyes fell upon these words: "I really think that Mrs. Verulam is the smartest woman in town. Her mother, Lady Sophia Tree, is famous for her knowledge of the art of dress, but Mrs. Verulam surpasses even Lady Sophia in her understanding of what to wear and how to wear it. I met her

driving in the Park on Friday in an exquisite creation of cinnamon canvas with touches of blue, that suited her dark-gray eyes and her exquisite golden-brown hair to—"

"Marriner, why do you give me this to read?"

"I thought you had not seen it, ma'am."

Mrs. Verulam threw the paper down.

"Leave me, Marriner," she said, in a low voice.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wait. Is Mrs. Van Adam's room quite ready for her?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Take Mr. Rodney's roses, unfasten them, and put them in vases about the room."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now spray me, Marriner."

Marriner took up a silver bottle, pressed a minute bladder, and scattered a shower of tiny scented drops over the pretty face as pale as a Pierrot; then, carrying the burden of dull-red roses, she withdrew from the room as softly as a cat.

Mrs. Verulam lay back on the coloured cushions, and closed her eyes so tightly that her forehead was wrinkled in a frown. The Admiral who lived in the next house but one was just setting bravely forth in his ducks, on which the sun shone approvingly. At the doors of many houses stood carriages, and many pretty women were stepping into them, dressed for dining, concerts, or drums. The Row was fairly full of crawlers, whose dull eyes—glazed with much staring—glanced eternally around in search of food for gossip. Flowers flamed along the Park railings from the Corner to the Marble Arch, and a few unfashionable people, who were fond of plants, examined the odorous pageant in botan-

ical attitudes that seemed strangely out of place in London. And the concert of the town continued. Its music came faintly to the ears of Mrs. Verulam, as it had come now for so many seasons. For she was twenty-nine, and had not missed a London summer since she was eighteen, except that one, eight years ago, which followed the sudden death of a husband with whom she had never been really in love.

Lying there alone, Mrs. Verulam said to herself that she was utterly sick of this concert, which each succeeding year persistently encored. She heard the distant wheels, and thought of the parties to which they were rolling. She heard the very remote music of a band; and that reminded her of the quantities of cotillons she had led, and of the innumerable faces of men that she had wiped out of mirrors with her lace handkerchief. How curiously they flashed and faded on the calm surface of the imperturbable glass, their eyes full of gay or of languid inquiry, their mouths gleaming in set society smiles!

Was it a property of cotillon mirrors, she wondered, to make all men look alike, neat, vacuous, self-satisfied? Half unconsciously she fluttered her tiny handkerchief as if she passed it across an invisible mirror. And now the surface was clean and clear, empty of masks for a moment. Then there was born on it a big and bearded countenance. It seemed too large almost to be called a face. Hair flourished upon that countenance as prickles upon the porcupine. Large and ox-like eyes of a reddish-brown hue stared heavily out beneath brows that seemed like thatched eaves. Mrs. Verulam, in fancy, gazed upon this apparition in the mirror and laid her handkerchief aside. She would not wipe the red-brown eyes, the thick lips, the intrusive hair away. And then,

suddenly, she laughed to herself, thinking of the dancing sequel to her deed of the cotillon, and of what it would be like in reality.

“Poor fellow!” she thought. “He would die in a valse. That is why I will not, dare not, wipe him out of the mirror from which I long to eliminate forever the other faces.”

And she thought of a far-off cabbage-garden somewhere on the outskirts of Berkshire, where life was surely peaceful, contemplative, and more worthy than in London. Fruits ripened there. Pears hung upon the trees, and cherries slept in the sun. And the bearded face was often bent wrathfully above the hapless snail or erring maggot. At least so Mrs. Verulam supposed. For she had never yet visited this sweet Eden of vegetables and manly labours. Some day, perhaps, she would go there. Some day! Some day! She opened her eyes and glanced up. They fell upon a pet of hers, a ruddy squirrel with a bushy tail, which scrambled in a revolving cage such as squirrels are supposed to love. Persistently the squirrel scrambled and the golden cage went round. Mrs. Verulam watched it, and her mind sprang to the obvious comparison. She saw London, the cage, herself the squirrel turning in it and longing to be free. And how she pitied the squirrel! What woman has not bowels of mercy for herself? She had revolved through so many seasons. Would she revolve through many more? Suddenly an expression of stern resolve came into the pretty Pierrot face clouded by bright hair. Mrs. Verulam thrilled with a great determination. Her manner was almost Napoleonic as she sat upright and clasped her hands together in a gesture of negation. She swept the cards on the table into a heap. She flung the notes of invi-

tation aside. She sprang up and went over to the squirrel. He peered at her with his bright and beady little eyes.

"Tommy," she said, "listen to me. Do you know that you are like me? Do you know that I, too, am in a cage—that I, too, am turning and turning in a prison that is monotonous as a circus, in which everyone and everything must go round and round and round? I am so tired of it, Tommy; so tired of my cage. And yet, do you know, half the world is trying to get into it—and can't! Is n't that absurd? To try to get into society! Oh, Tommy—"

"Mrs. Van Adam!" said the footman at the door.

Mrs. Verulam turned as a tall, slim, boyish-looking creature in a red gown and a red-and-black hat came upon her with a sweet rush and took her in strong arms of affection.

"Dearest Daisy!"

"Darling Chloe!"

The footman looked pleased beneath his powder. Perhaps it was his agreeable smile which drew Mrs. Verulam's attention to him.

"Francis, say 'not at home' this afternoon," she murmured, with a gesture of dismissal.

"Yes, ma'am."

And Francis took his smile below-stairs, leaving the two friends alone. They stood for a moment by the squirrel's cage, watching each other with kind eyes that were yet alight with sparks of criticism. For all sweet women are critics, just as all sweet babies are like their fathers. The laws of nature are so strangely immutable. Then Mrs. Van Adam said, in a low contralto voice, that was almost manly:

"I believe you are sweeter here than you were in

Paris. How do you manage it? America would love you."

"I am not a Duke."

"That's true, but you would come right next."

"And you! Oh, Chloe, in that hat! But why is your hair cut short?"

Mrs. Van Adam laughed, and took off the scarlet-and-black hat.

"It was so hot on our plantation in Florida that I wanted to have as little about me as possible," she said.

"It makes you look just like a boy!"

"I'll grow it again here."

"Have you brought a maid?"

"No. I want to engage a London woman."

"Come and sit down. It is so strange for us to be together again. How many years is it since we were schoolgirls in Paris, getting education instead of gowns? And now—"

"You're a little widow, and the darling of London!"

"And you— By the way, how is Mr. Van Adam?"

"I am told he is quite well."

Mrs. Verulam raised her eyebrows.

"You are told, Chloe!" she said. "You are told!"

But Mrs. Van Adam was looking about the room with eager dark eyes.

"Your house is delicious!" she exclaimed. "I shall love to be here. Florida is lonely, and New York is— well, it has no aristocracy. And a capital without an aristocracy is like a town man without a silk hat. The toilet is incomplete. It was cool of me to cable you that I was coming. But you do n't mind?"

"I am delighted. I have been wanting you to come for so long."

"And the season is just beginning?"

The weariness that had died in Mrs. Verulam's eyes sprang up in them again.

"Yes," she said; "it is just beginning."

Mrs. Van Adam made an ecstatic gesture. There was in her manner something of the vivacity of a colt; a frolicsome readiness for bodily movement, a quickness of limb that goes with gaiety, and a sweeping appreciation of the luxury of joy. Her eyes danced and brimmed over with light, and expectation of pleasure turned her appearance almost to that of a child who sees a vision of sugar-plums.

"That's lucky!" she cried. "Daisy, you don't know how I feel about your society; I have never been in it, but I have heard of it ever since I was a girl in Paris. You told me a little then."

"I knew very little, then."

"Well, you told me just all you knew, and it sounded perfect."

"Chloe, when I was in Paris I was a little fool."

But Mrs. Van Adam did not seem to hear the remark; she was bent upon speaking, and she went on: "Since then I've heard the travellers' tales of the Holy Land."

"The Holy Land!"

"London, dear. Some of our travellers abuse the old town, it's true; but they want to go back to it when April comes round, all the same. I think it gets into their blood, as the East gets into the blood of lovers of the picturesque; anyhow, it's got into mine. Daisy, you think I'm pretty still, don't you?"

"Pretty—yes, lovely with that short hair."

"And I'm immensely rich, of course; and I'm an American. Give me London to play with."

"But, my dear Chloe—"

"Yes. Now do. You can give it me. I know that.

Our papers are full of your triumphs. You are the pet of society."

"Nonsense, Chloe!"

"But you are; you go everywhere."

"Yes; that is why I am so tired—that is why—"

"Let me go with you. Oh, Daisy, if you only knew how I long to get into London society!"

"Oh, Chloe, if you only knew how I long to get out of it!"

Mrs. Van Adam looked quite petrified by this exclamation. She drew her black brows together, screwed up her eyes, and scrutinized Mrs. Verulam with a merciless curiosity, such as a child displays before a strange and ineffable monster. Her scrutiny was silent, exhaustive, and apparently conclusive, since she closed it with the remark:

"You little joker, you have n't altered a bit since Paris!" Then, without giving Mrs. Verulam time to assert the truth of her announced feeling, Chloe turned to the table that stood beside the sofa: "Cards!" she said. "What a heap! All yesterday's?"

"Or to-day's."

"And notes—invitations?"

Mrs. Verulam nodded.

"May I look at them?"

"If you like. They're stupid things."

"Stupid! They beat diamonds." She took one up with reverent fingers. "'To have the honour to meet the Prince and Princess of—'"

Mrs. Van Adam read the words aloud in a voice that shook with emotion. Her eyes glowed behind a veil of moisture as they gazed upon the sacred pasteboard. It seemed for a moment as if she would bend her pretty head and touch it with her pretty lips; but she was a

woman of strong character, and she refrained. What that silent struggle cost her the world will never know. After a period of profound silence she laid the card down gently, as one lays down a blessed relic. Then she sprang upon Mrs. Verulam and passionately embraced her.

"Oh, you darling!" she cried.

Before Mrs. Verulam could either acquiesce or protest Mrs. Van Adam had fallen upon the other invitations, as the drowning man falls upon the straw. She rifled the big envelopes of their contents. She tore Lady Emily Crane from her modest concealment, brought Sir Algernon Smith into the sunlight in the twinkling of an eye, laid Lady Clondart upon the table like Patience, and put Mrs. Vigors on end against a flower-vase. The acrobats, the conjuror, the Holy Land, Madame Melba, the panthers of Sartorius—she faced them all, and drew a deep breath that was like a sob. Heaven opened out before her, and she lay back against a cushion prostrated and overwhelmed. In great moments such as these the human creature feels its smallness, and hears the mighty inexorable pulse beating in the huge and mysterious heart of life. These two women were pale and silent while you could have counted a hundred, the one laid low by ennui, occasioned by the same cause that laid the other low by ecstasy. Thus do even the closest friends differ. At last Mrs. Van Adam lifted herself up and spoke in a low voice as of an Anglican in Westminster Abbey:

"Take me with you, Daisy—oh, do—do take me with you!"

"Where?"

"To Lady Emily Crane's, to Mr. Pettingham's, to Lady Clondart's, Mrs. Vigors', Sir Algernon Smith's,

and—oh, Daisy!—to have the honour to meet the—you know, I can't say it. Let me see the panthers, and the Holy Land, and the Prince and Princess."

"They are not in the least good-looking."

"The panthers, Daisy?"

"No; the royalties. Those I mean—they are foreign and plain."

"That does n't matter. It is so unnecessary for them to take the trouble to be handsome; for us it's quite—quite different."

Mrs. Verulam smiled; but the smile flitted, and the bored expression returned.

"If I did take you, Chloe, you would find it all terribly dull, especially Mr. Pettingham's."

"Does n't he know good people—not religious, you know, but good?"

"Oh, yes—everybody in London; but his parties are dreadful. You sit in the pitch dark while he describes to you how he discovered Venice or Vienna, and shows you the Lido or Lowndes Square, upside down as often as not. His coloured slides are really agonizing."

"But his guests?"

"Oh! they're all right, of course, so far as any—any smart people are all right."

Mrs. Van Adam was about to utter a fervent protest, but Mrs. Verulam displayed sudden energy. She sat straight up, planted her little feet firmly on a tiny satin footstool, clasped her soft hands, and said:

"No; hear me, Chloe. You do n't understand things. It is my duty to tell you what this London society is. It is a cage, like the cage of my squirrel Tommy, and those who are in it are captives—yes, yes, wretched captives—for I speak of us, of the women. The men are not so bound. They can escape from a ball directly

after supper without being thought greedy; they can leave invitations unanswered, and be considered well-bred; they can forget a dinner party, and retain respect; they can commit a thousand outrages, and yet remain gentlemen. How it is so nobody knows, but everybody knows that it is so; but we—we women! What is London society to us?"

"Heaven."

"Purgatory. We have to look pretty when we should like to rest and be quietly plain; we have to talk when we have nothing to say to men who talk and have nothing to say to us; we have to take exercise—in the way of smiling—that would knock up an athlete; we have to be made love to—"

"Charming! Exquisite!"

"When we long to be left alone with our neuralgia, and to listen to music when all our nervous system is quivering for silence. We have to flirt through 'Tristan' and laugh through 'Lohengrin.' We have to eat when we are not hungry, watch polo when we are longing for sleep, go to Ranelagh instead of to bed, and stand like sheep in a pen for hours at a stretch."

"Yes, but the other sheep!"

"All baa in the same way and on the same note; all jump over the same imaginary fence, because one has jumped over a real one; all are branded with the same mark, washed in the same pool and shorn with the same scissors."

"Mercy, darling! Are you a farmer?"

A tender smile dawned in Mrs. Verulam's eyes.

"No," she murmured softly. "It was James Bush who taught me all about sheep."

"James Bush!"

"Yes. If you want to stop a ewe from coughing—"

"Daisy!"

Mrs. Verulam flushed a lovely rose colour.

"His knowledge is wonderful," she cooed. "He cured a calf which had the staggers with a preparation of his own—not Elliman."

"Who is he?"

"Some day I 'll tell you; but it was not Elliman, and it was more effective."

And she fell into a beautiful reverie—one of those strange and mysterious trains of thought so apt to be suggested by an embrocation.

CHAPTER II

BOSWELL AS CHAPERON

But Mrs. Van Adam cared nothing for such high matters. Though a charming, she was perhaps not strictly an intellectual woman. And, besides, at the moment she was full of purpose.

"Daisy—Daisy dear!" she cried, gently and persuasively shaking her dreaming friend. "Is Mr. Bush in society?"

Mrs. Verulam turned pale.

"He—never!" she exclaimed.

"Oh," said Mrs. Van Adam, losing all interest in him, "then do n't let us talk about him any more. But, Daisy, you will—you will take me out, won't you? You can, I know."

"Yes, I can. People will like you. But—"

"Then it 's settled. Oh, how happy I am!"

She sprang up and almost danced round the room.

"But, Chloe, only for the next two months, or indeed less. For you must know that I have come to a great resolution."

Chloe choked a pirouette, which left her poised on tiptoe, with the skirt of her red gown swinging like a poppy in a wind.

"What is it?"

"Simply that this season is my last. Wait!" She held up one hand to check her friend's exclamation.

"And," she added, "that I shall leave town at least by the first of July, if not sooner."

Chloe's face fell for a moment. But then she recovered from the shock.

"The first of July. Oh, by that time I shall know everybody, and—"

"Be as weary of everybody as I am."

"Be able to manage for myself. Besides, you darling, society won't let you leave it."

At these words Mrs. Verulam's face became almost as deplorable in expression as that of an undertaker who is obliged by cruel circumstances to attend to business on a Bank Holiday.

"That is what I fear," she said. "That is the terror which pursues me night and day. But it must, Chloe—it shall! And yet nobody knows—except those who have tried it—how terribly, how appallingly difficult it is to get out of society. To get into it is nothing. There are a thousand ways of doing that. Be a German Jew or a brewer, and you are there. I knew a man who got into it by merely going out to South Africa and coming back at once in the disguise of a millionaire. And he only spent a couple of hours at Cape Town. But once you are in society and popular, the cage door is shut. And then what can the squirrel do?"

Tears flooded her dark gray eyes. Chloe pressed her friend's hand with forced sympathy for a misfortune which she found it difficult to understand. Mrs. Verulam cleared her throat and continued:

"I have made many attempts, but each one seems to give me a more secure footing in the great world. Once I lost all my money."

"What?"

"Gave out that I had, you know."

"And what happened?"

"Oh, it was so dreadful. My acquaintances rallied round me. Have you ever been rallied round?"

"I do n't know that I have."

"It is most fatiguing. It is worse than the Derby, although, of course, you avoid the coaches. Another time I tried to become unfashionable—did my hair on the nape of my neck, wore a pelerine and elastic-sided boots."

"Surely they let you go then?"

"No. On the contrary, the Park was full of pelerines, and you met elastic-sided boots everywhere, even at Marlborough House."

"Marlborough House! You visit there?"

"Oh, naturally! Then, as a last resource, I took a really desperate step."

"What was that?"

"I went to live in St. John's Wood."

Mrs. Verulam gazed firmly at Mrs. Van Adam, as if expectant of a fit on her friend's part. But Mrs. Van Adam merely repeated:

"St. John's Wood! Where is that?"

"Well, where it ought n't to be, you understand."

"Oh!"

The word expressed mystification. Chloe was evidently at sea. Mrs. Verulam did not shed light through the clouds, but continued rapidly:

"The only effect of that was that I founded a colony."

"I thought only Mr. Chamberlain did that sort of thing."

"You do n't understand. I mean that others followed me there, instead of leaving me there. Lady Crichton came to Selina Place. Lord Bray and his girl

settled in Upsilon Road, and the old Duchess of Worcester sat down just round the corner in Maud Crescent. Oh, it was monstrous!"

Chloe's eyes shone.

"What would I give to be you?" she cried. "A duchess sitting down just round the corner for one! How glorious!"

She spoke as Wagnerians of "Parsifal," and at that moment she worshipped her friend. But Mrs. Verulam made a petulant *moue* and said, almost with acrimony:

"I really believe there is only one way in which I could do what I wish; that is, without going to live in some other country, which I do n't care to do."

"What way is that?"

"If I were to compromise myself seriously. Now, if I were married, I should have a weapon against the assaults of society."

"I do n't quite see how."

"Dear Chloe, really you are not quite clever. I could be divorced, do n't you see?"

A shadow came suddenly into Mrs. Van Adam's dark and boyish face.

"Divorced," she faltered. "Would—would that help you much?"

"Help me? It would save me. Nothing further would be needed. I should be out of everything at once, and in the most perfect peace and quiet."

The shadow deepened perceptibly, and Mrs. Van Adam moved rather uneasily on her sofa. However, she made no further remark, and Mrs. Verulam continued:

"Circumstances render that route to what I long for one which I can't take. And besides, in any case, I doubt if I should have been equal to it. For I was born

respectable, and I shall certainly remain so. Yet, do you know, Chloe, if there were any way—if only I could compromise myself in the eyes of the world without compromising myself in my own eyes, I would do it. I would do anything to get out of my cage."

"As I would do anything to get into it."

Mrs. Verulam sighed deeply, put her handkerchief to her eyes, took it down, and then seemed with an effort of will to recover herself and to dismiss the problem that perplexed her. For she sat in a more flexible attitude, and, turning to Chloe, said ingenuously:

"And now, dear, about Mr. Van Adam?"

Chloe jumped, and Mrs. Verulam, observing this, continued:

"Tell me all about him, when he will follow you, how happy you are together, and why he did not accompany you."

"Well, you see," Mrs. Van Adam said, rather faintly, "his oranges."

"Oranges?"

"Yes. You know he grows them on a gigantic scale."

"Well?"

"And—and they can't always be left."

"Chloe, remember I was at school with you in Paris."

The words were very simple, but Mrs. Verulam uttered them without simplicity, and Chloe flushed quickly.

"I know," she said. "But it is—it is true. Oranges require a great deal of looking after."

"Oh, dear, if you prefer to keep me in the dark, of course I shan't say another word. Now I am sure you would like to see your room, so I shall ring for Marriner."

Mrs. Verulam leaned forward to touch the bell, but

Chloe suddenly sprang up, sat down close beside her, and took her hand.

"You are right, Daisy. It 's not the oranges."

"Of course not."

"No. It—I—Mr. Van Adam—"

"Yes."

"Mr. Van Adam and I have parted."

"Parted!"

"We are separated."

"Legally?"

"Yes. We are—divorced."

Mrs. Verulam kissed Chloe pitifully.

"Oh, my poor Chloe! And so soon! How dreadful to have to divorce one's husband almost before the honeymoon was over."

Chloe's cheeks flushed more darkly.

"How rapidly you jump to conclusions, Daisy," she said, almost irritably. "I remember now you used to do the same thing in Paris."

"Jump! But—"

"I did not say I divorced Mr. Van Adam. Now did I? Did I? Oh, I do dislike these imputations!"

Mrs. Verulam opened her pretty mouth to gasp, shut it without gasping, and then remarked severely: "I hope he divorced you for something American, Chloe."

"Now, what do you mean?"

"For one of those American actions that are considered culpable in married people in your country: wearing your hair the wrong colour, or talking without an American accent, or disliking clams or Thanksgiving Day, or something of that kind."

"No, it was not clams. Besides, I like them rather. No, Daisy, it was an—an English action I was divorced for."

Mrs. Verulam began to look exceedingly grave.

"English! Then it must have been something bad!"

"No, it was n't! It was all a mistake. Mr. Van Adam was terribly jealous. You have never seen him, Daisy. But he is one of those men with a temperament. Never marry a man with a temperament—that is to say, if he loves you. And Huskinson did love me."

She drooped pensively. But Mrs. Verulam's severity of expression increased.

"A temperament!" she said. "Now, Chloe, please do n't abuse a man for not being deformed. I'm afraid you've done something dreadful."

"I have n't. I've done nothing. But I would n't defend the case. I was too proud. Huskinson—"

"Why is your husband's name Huskinson?"

"Ah! that's one of the things I've often and often wondered. It does seem so unnecessary. I feel that, too."

She checked the natural tendency to muse created by this strange problem, and went on:

"At first we were only pleasantly unhappy together. I liked his fury, and when he was good-tempered I bitterly resented it, and tried to check it by every means in my power. I generally succeeded in doing so. We women can do these things, you know, Daisy; and that's something."

"Yes."

"But as time went on, Huskinson—"

"I wonder why that's his name," Mrs. Verulam murmured uncontrollably.

"Got so accustomed to being angry that it became very monotonous. There was no variety in him at all. And one does look for variety in a man."

"Not if he's a London man."

"Huskinson is n't."

"Oh, with his name—no. Go on, darling."

"We were in New York at first, you know. And while we were there it was all right. I like a man angry in the street very well, or in a hotel. It shows people he's really fond of you. But then we went to the oranges—Florida, you see. And it was understood between us that we were to live an idyllic life there. The climate was suited to that sort of thing, and Huskinson's—"

"I do wonder—"

"The bungalow was specially constructed for peace, with verandas and rocking-chairs and a pet monkey, all complete. It was pretty."

She sighed.

"I never saw a pretty monkey yet," said Mrs. Verulam, meditatively.

"Boswell was."

"Who on earth was Boswell?"

"Huskinson's monkey. It fed out of his hand."

"How greedy!"

"He did n't think so. Well, I meant Huskinson to become good-tempered now. He had been angry for two months or more, and it was right there should be a little change. Besides, we were to be quite alone, we and Boswell, so that I did n't require him to be jealous, as I had in New York City. But Huskinson is the sort of man who can't stop when once he has got into the way of a thing. He must go right on with it, wherever he is. That is n't artistic. Now, is it, Daisy dear?"

"I suppose not—no."

"Well, in Florida he was just as he was in New York. That man would sit in a rocking-chair with Boswell on his knee or in his hair, and be as furiously jealous as Othello. Even that monkey could n't soothe him. It

was too monotonous. I told him so. But he did n't seem to see it. I said being abused and watching oranges grow was all right for a certain time, but if it continued for eternity I should wish I had n't married."

"That was rather cruel."

"That was what he said. He beat Boswell with a cane, and cried, and told the men on the plantation that if I said such a thing again he should cut down their wages. That set them against me. And Boswell took a hatred for me, too. I was beginning to grow quite weary of it all when Bream Rockmetteller came."

"Bream Rockmetteller!"

"Huskinson's dearest chum. Bream Rock—"

"I do wonder—"

"—Metteller was to sympathize with Huskinson; that was why he was invited. He travelled nearly two thousand miles to do it, but as soon as he was in the bungalow Huskinson became furiously jealous of him. You see, Bream did n't think me ugly; that was his first mistake. Oh, how that man did blunder! He admired the way I put my clothes on, too, and thought it suited me quite well to wear my hair short. In fact, he went from one crime to another—so Huskinson considered."

"Then, was Bream the—"

"Yes. Oh, Daisy, a little man with one of those beards you see in a nonsense book, and a voice that shook him when he spoke, it was so much too large for him, and feet as small as yours, and stocks and shares in all his pockets, and even up his sleeves. How could anyone suppose that I—"

"Then, why did n't you defend it?"

Chloe put her lips together. When she did that she looked like a very determined boy.

"Because I was in the right."

"I see," said Mrs. Verulam, accepting a good reason in the usual sweet, womanly way.

"I was perfectly innocent. I had to sit with Bream while Huskinson was seeing about the oranges."

"Of course."

And when Huskinson attacked Bream it was my duty to say that Bream was harmless."

"Certainly."

"But my doing this brought Huskinson to the verge of madness. He went away suddenly for a week."

"Leaving Bream?"

"Yes. And then he came back, and said that we had deceived him by being together alone."

"How unreasonable!"

"That the whole plantation was talking about us, and that Boswell was nothing at all in the way of a chaperon. This was too much. While Bream was in the billiard-room, arguing with Huskinson and locking up the revolvers, I packed my trunks, got into the buggy, and proceeded. I thought that my woman's dignity required it of me. The next thing was that Huskinson sued for a divorce. I would n't defend it, for I was real angry. Bream was down with fever. And the end of it was that Huskinson got the case."

"Dreadful!"

Chloe, who had been looking very emotional during the latter part of her tragic narrative, changed her expression to one of calm indifference at this remark.

"Why dreadful? I do n't think so. It was all done very quietly, right away from New York. Nobody will hear of it over this way. Even in New York they do n't know it, for Huskinson turned sulky when he'd done it, went back to his oranges, and won't say a word to anyone. Bream's still down with fever somewhere

in California. And though he's got that big voice he scarcely ever speaks. Besides, I'm innocent."

She looked hard at Mrs. Verulam.

"Yes, dear; I know that."

Chloe winked away something that might have been the usual thing that is winked away on such an occasion. Then she said, with a gay smile:

"So I've packed my trunks, and come over here to forget it all and have a good time."

Mrs. Verulam gazed at her meditatively, and said, "Oh!"

Chloe, her narrative over, seemed to desire movement. She got up and wandered about the room in a slightly reckless manner, touching ornaments with fingers that seemed deliberately dare-devil, and examining pictures with eyes that were self-consciously bold. Occasionally she shot a side glance toward Mrs. Verulam, who remained with her feet planted on the satin footstool in an attitude of profound and rather grievous thought. Presently, in her peregrinations, Chloe reached the *World*, which Mrs. Verulam had flung down in her wrath of ennui. Chloe bent and picked it up.

"Ah, this is your great paper!" she cried. "I love it. I want to see my name in it some day."

While she spoke, she had been idly turning the pages. And now she gave a great cry, such as Marguerite gives over the dead body of Valentine in the fourth act of "Faust."

Mrs. Verulam started round on her sofa, and saw that Chloe's face was pale as death, and that the *World* was fluttering upside down in her nerveless hand.

"Chloe, what is the matter? Are you ill? Oh, I must ring for Marriner!"

But Chloe pointed to the paper.

"Read—read!" she muttered.

Mrs. Verulam snatched the *World* from her, and read this innocent little paragraph:

" 'A considerable sensation has been caused in the neighbourhood of Florida by the Van Adam divorce, the details of which have only just become generally known. They are, unfortunately, very unfavourable to the beautiful Mrs. Van Adam, from whom the famous orange-grower and millionaire has been freed by the action of the court. A great deal of sympathy is expressed for Mr. Van Adam, whose honeymoon had scarcely concluded when the sad circumstances arose which obliged him to condemn, not merely his wife, but also his trusted friend, Mr. Bream Rockmetteller, the well-known stockbroker. Mr. Van Adam is staying at present at his bungalow in the midst of his orange groves in Florida. His only companion is said to be the monkey which used in former days to accompany him on all his wanderings.' "

"That 's Boswell," Chloe murmured hysterically.

Mrs. Verulam laid the paper down rather impressively.

"Chloe," she said, "you can never get into the cage now, that is certain."

Chloe sobbed. It was a bitter moment for her. She looked at the invitation cards. She thought of the panthers and of the Prince and Princess, and became rapidly, and very naturally, hysterical.

"Is it—oh, is it quite impossible?" she said, in a broken voice.

"Quite. If you were a man, now!"

Chloe lifted her head.

"If you were a man," Mrs. Verulam continued, in the voice of a philosopher, "that paragraph might open the cage door for you. London is very fond of wicked

men—forgive me, darling!—of men who are supposed, and hoped to be wicked. With your wealth, your history, and a different sex, you would be a great success this season."

"Oh, why am I not a man?"

"Marriner—she's my maid, and marvellously well informed about everything—Marriner might know. I can't tell."

"And I have been a man. How cruel it all is!"

Mrs. Verulam was really surprised this time. For a moment she thought that Chloe's brain was turned by Huskinson's action and its results.

"Chloe dear, collect yourself," she said firmly. "Pull yourself together, darling. Do n't deceive yourself even for a moment. You have always been what you are now—a woman."

"No, no!" Chloe repeated doggedly; "I was a man. They all thought so."

Mrs. Verulam became seriously alarmed.

"I think, dear, you had better lie down quietly, and put on a cold compress. I shall send you up some strong tea in a few minutes, and—"

"Do n't be foolish, Daisy. I was a man at a fancy ball in Chicago once, just before I married Huskinson. I went in a man's ordinary morning costume, and took in everyone. Even Huskinson did n't know me! Ah, that suit—it was such a neat tweed, Daisy!—it reminds me of happy days. I carry it everywhere with me."

She spoke sentimentally, and Mrs. Verulam was led to observe:

"I'm afraid you love Bream—I mean Huskinson."

"No, I do n't; no, no!" Chloe said vehemently. "No, I do n't!"

"Oh, I'm glad to hear it, under the circumstances."

"But naturally I look back to the days before—before—"

"Yes, yes, dear. I know, I know!"

Mrs. Verulam patted Chloe's hands gently. Then she smiled and said:

"You should have come over in the tweed suit, Chloe, then London would have been at your feet."

She spoke without definite intention, merely anxious to tide over an awkward moment. She heard no strange echo of her remark replying from the future in tones to mock her. She saw no little cloud rising upon the horizon. She thrilled with no convulsive premonition of a marching destiny approaching stealthily with slipped feet. And when Chloe looked at her fixedly for the space of three minutes, and then said slowly, "Should I? Should I?" she thought nothing of it. Nor did she specially remark her friend's sudden absence of mind, or the expression of curious whimsicality that stole into her face. The human soul is sometimes strangely unobservant in great crises.

"Are you at home this afternoon?" Chloe remarked abruptly.

"No, not to anyone."

"I'm glad. Let me go upstairs and change my dress, and then I want to talk to you ever so much more. Oh, that horrible, wicked paragraph!"

Mrs. Verulam touched the bell. Francis answered it.

"Please send Mrs. Marriner to me," she said.

Francis retired smiling, and in a moment the faithful Marriner appeared sedately in the aperture of the door.

"Marriner," said Mrs. Verulam, "this is Mrs. Van Adam. I want you to take great care of her. She has come from Florida."

"A long distance, indeed, ma'am. I trust the oranges are doing well, ma'am?"

Chloe turned paler, and Mrs. Verulam said hastily:

"Never mind the oranges, Marriner. Mrs. Van Adam is going to engage a maid in London. Meanwhile, I know you will see that she is perfectly comfortable in every way."

"Certainly, ma'am."

"Marriner will show you your room, Chloe; and tea will be ready as soon as you are."

Mrs. Van Adam followed the faithful Marriner toward the door. Reaching it, she looked back at Mrs. Verulam, exclaimed, "I am going to put on a tailor-made costume," and vanished.

Just as the door shut Mrs. Verulam heard the voice of Marriner saying:

"I trust, ma'am, the stairs will not inconvenience you. In Florida I am aware that the one-story residence and the ample veranda are quite the mode."

CHAPTER III

NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE BUN EMPEROR

When Mrs. Verulam was alone once more she fell into deep and earnest thought. She was a little pleased, a little vexed, a little agitated, a little excited, and a little perplexed. She found herself in a novel situation, that was also, in a degree, an awkward situation. An hour ago she had been sighing for a means of escape from society; she had even been yearning to be compromised in order that she might be shunned, and, being shunned, might find that peace which she had so long desired. Now she was shut up with a divorced woman, whose story was told in the weekly issue of the best-known society paper of the day; and this divorced woman, innocent certainly, but guilty in the eyes of the world and of the law, was her intimate and old school friend, knew scarcely a soul in England except herself, and had arrived to make a long stay with her just as the season was beginning. Here was food for thought, indeed. That paragraph rendered it quite impossible for Mrs. Van Adam to obtain any footing whatever in society; that paragraph also rendered it quite impossible for Mrs. Verulam to introduce her to charming friends. If Mrs. Verulam stirred abroad with Chloe, the most ardent complications must ensue; if she stayed at home with her, people would call and introductions would be inevitable. As Mrs. Verulam sat there it began to seem

to her that Providence had at length heard her cry, and had made the necessary arrangements for her exit from society—at any rate, for one summer. If Chloe stayed on with her in Park Lane, she would—she could have no season at all. For even these dear friends who so clung to her, who rallied round her in her supposed poverty, who assumed pelerines and elastic-sided boots in her imitation, who even followed her into the wicked Wood, and there abode like disciples in the desert, even these would not be able to visit or to receive her when she had for close companion the now infamous, although so innocent, Mrs. Van Adam. Should she keep Chloe? That was the problem which Mrs. Verulam was now debating. The sacred duties of hospitality, the yet more sacred duties of friendship, ought surely to decide that question in the affirmative. And yet Mrs. Verulam could not hide from herself the fact that she had intended her exit from society—desired, certainly—to be made more gradually than was possible under the new circumstances so suddenly arisen. She had intended, as it were, to make an effective farewell speech, to see around her not a single dry eye while she made it, to hear the murmur of uncontrollable regret, and to note personally the devastation caused by her brilliant and unalterable decision, persisted in despite so many difficulties. She had, in fact, intended, like an actress, to have a good-bye season; but Fate seemed about to dispose matters otherwise. And so Mrs. Verulam bit her pretty lip and sighed a gentle sigh. In the midst of these pathetic evolutions the drawing-room door opened, and James, the second footman, showed in a tall, thin, fiddle-faced man of about forty-two, whose rather plaintive eyes and agreeable expression quarrelled mildly with a sinister moustache of the tooth-brush persuasion, and whose neat black

hair and soothing gait diffused around him an atmosphere of scented repose and aristocracy. This was Mr. Hyacinth Rodney, whose claim upon our notice is that he believes he loves Mrs. Verulam.

On seeing him Mrs. Verulam started, for she was "not at home," and to be forced by a careless flunkey to be what you are not, "doth work like madness in the brain." But James was gone, and Mr. Rodney was reposefully approaching. So Mrs. Verulam was true to her order, and smiled at him.

"Thank you for your roses," she said, "a thousand times."

Mr. Rodney was seated. It would scarcely be true to say that he sat down, so imperceptibly, so noiselessly, so adroitly, was the manœuvre executed. He took Mrs. Verulam's hand into his as a botanist takes a wondrous orchid.

"Happy roses," he said, in a low voice full of music as soft as Berlioz's ballet of sylphs; "they came from Mitching Dean." Mitching Dean was Mr. Rodney's place in Hampshire. Almost everything he possessed, gave away, or thought much about, seemed to come from there. "But I did not come to be thanked for giving myself a pleasure," he added; "I came to bring glad tidings."

"I shall think of you as a herald angel."

"Flying ever to my heaven in Park Lane."

"Charming! But your tidings?"

"Are of Ascot, or, rather, of Sunninghill. My mission has been successful; the house is yours."

Mr. Rodney glanced at his long feet modestly. This was his way of concealing pride in his own resource and gratification at his own diplomacy.

"Ascot, Sunninghill!" Mrs. Verulam said, with an

intonation of pretty bewilderment which was not assumed.

Mr. Rodney withdrew his eyes from his feet rather suddenly and looked at Mrs. Verulam.

"Surely you have not forgotten that in the early spring you commissioned me to get you Ribton Marches for the race week " he murmured, with a sort of soporific reproach.

"Oh! did I? Of course; now I remember."

"Only now?" He contrived a sigh that was an art product, and resumed: "I opened delicate negotiations about the matter on February the fourteenth, and have been proceeding carefully ever since. One false step would have been instant destruction."

"My dear Mr. Rodney—"

"Instant destruction," he repeated, with a slight sforzando, "owing to the temper of the owner, Mr. Lite, the Bun Emperor."

"The Bun Emperor!"

"He is universally named so by the children of the British Isles, for whom he—caters, I think they call it."

"Dear me! how many words there are in the dictionary that one never hears in society."

"Mercifully—most mercifully! Mr. Lite is a man of very peculiar proclivities. I have made a minute study of them in order to carry out your instructions successfully."

"It is most good and industrious of you."

"Oh, I shrink from nothing in such a cause. He is, I must tell you, a man of violent temper and enormous means, devoted to home life, and extremely suspicious of strangers."

"What a terrible combination of idiosyncrasies!"

"Precisely. My difficulty was to dislodge a man of

such a character from his 'temple of domesticity,' as he calls it, even for one week. There were, I confess it, moments in which despair seized me, and I could have cried aloud, like an Eastern pilgrim, 'Allah has turned his face from me!' "

"I am quite ashamed to have given you so much trouble. Is that really what Eastern pilgrims say?"

"When the desert is waterless, and the camels die like flies."

"Imitative even to the last. But, then, how did you ever persuade the—the Bun Emperor to leave his home? It sounds like the 'Arabian Nights.' "

Mr. Rodney looked at his feet again, and seemed to grow thin with self-appreciation, for he never swelled with pride, any rotund exhibition being against his nature.

"Well, after many attempts, I found that I could only manage the affair in one way. Mr. Lite is very susceptible to titles—for advertising purposes, you understand."

Mrs. Verulam's face was a mask of perplexity.

"In reference to his buns."

"In reference to his buns! I'm really afraid—"

"This was literally the only string I could play upon, the only hold I could obtain over his inordinate passion for what he calls 'the home.' As soon as I had made sure of the fact, I ventured—" his voice sank in a deprecatory diminuendo—"I ventured, I hope not unduly, to make a promise on your behalf."

"Indeed!"

"Indeed. I said that if Mr. Lite would consent to let 'the home' to you for the race week, I would persuade you to use your influence with Lady Sophia—"

"Mamma!"

"With regard to the —well, in fact, the buns. Did I go too far?"

"And what is poor mamma to do? I can't ask her to eat a bun, Mr. Rodney, I really can't do that."

Mr. Rodney's fiddle face reddened with horror at the idea.

"Pray, pray do n't! Such a shocking notion would never have occurred to me. I trust that my natural delicacy could not go so far astray. No, I only pledged myself that you would persuade Lady Sophia to sign her name at the bottom of a word in praise—only a word—in praise of the buns. I have the form here with me."

Mr. Rodney took a silver case from his pocket, and extracted therefrom a sheet of note-paper.

"Mr. Lite drew this up under my supervision," he said. "It reads thus: 'I beg to say that I have every confidence in your buns. They look inviting on a counter, they should be nourishing, and they seem desirable in every respect. Your influence upon the digestions of our children is, I feel almost certain, such as will commend itself to all who have the desire ebullient within them to advance the cause of humanity.' Place for signature: 'Lady Sophia Tree.' I think Mr. Gladstone could scarcely improve upon that."

And Mr. Rodney again observed his boots.

"Mamma has only to sign that? She need n't eat anything?"

"Only to sign, I assure you."

"Then I am sure she will do it. She likes to see herself in print, and, as you know, has a fancy for authorship. You may have seen her name in the *Pall Mall Magazine* and *The Lady's Realm*?"

Mr. Rodney bent his head

"Often. Then that is happily arranged. I am dining with Mr. Lite to-night at the Crystal Palace to clinch the matter finally."

Mrs. Verulam's eyes filled with tears.

"You are dining at the Crystal Palace for me? Oh, Mr. Rodney!"

For a moment she was quite overcome. Nor was he entirely unmoved, although, manlike, he rigidly controlled the expression of a feeling that did him honour. He cleared his throat twice, it is true, but when he spoke again his voice was perfectly calm and natural.

"You will send this by messenger to Lady Sophia?"

"I will."

"And now as to your Ascot house-party."

At these words Mrs. Verulam was recalled to all her perplexities, and she involuntarily murmured:

"Chloe Van Adam!"

"Ah!" said Mr. Rodney, manifesting sudden animation, "did I hear you say Van Adam? Then you recognised my style? You read my little paragraph?"

"Your style? Your little what?"

"My little word in the *World* this week with reference to that sad American matter?"

"Oh, then it was you who put it in?"

"I have a friend in New York, Lord Bernard Roche, who sends me news of that world with which the White Star Line and the ties of brotherhood connect us. He wrote to me full of poor Huskinson's—as he calls him—matrimonial misfortunes."

"He calls him Huskinson, too?"

"Too! That is his name. In America they have names like that."

"And Bream?"

Mr. Rodney's face expressed a cultivated surprise.

"You know about Bream? Oh, but of course, in my paragraph I—"

"And Boswell? Oh!"

"You know about Bos—but I never mentioned its name in my—"

"Her Grace the Duchess of Southborough and the Lady Pearl McAndrew!" announced James.

Mrs. Verulam, whose mind was now fastened upon the presence of Chloe in the house, and her imminent advent into the room, rose up distractedly as two ladies slowly advanced, one smiling, and one on the contrary—the former was the Duchess, the latter was her only child. Her Grace was tall, elderly, large and respectable-looking. Lady Pearl was a trifle shorter, a trifle less elderly, a trifle narrower, and a trifle—but only a trifle less respectable-looking. The family likeness was marked, and the Southborough family was not one in which a family likeness was an unmixed benefit.

"So glad to find you at home, dear Mrs. Verulam," the Duchess said suavely, greeting Mr. Rodney also with marked cordiality. "We quite thought you would have been out on such a lovely day. What do you say? What?"

This to James, who had suddenly returned into the room to whisper respectfully in the ducal ear.

"Not enough! An extra sixpence! Certainly not. Tell him to go."

Exit James.

"But I know," her Grace continued, "that you are quite independent of the weather. In that respect you are like Southborough. He always— What do you say? He won't go?"

This to James, who had made a flushed re-entry accompanied by more emphatic whisperings.

"No, I shan't. Tell him so. Not another penny. We only took him from Whiteley's. He knows that. What?"

Whispers from James.

"It is n't more than two miles. No, no! Certainly not."

"Can I be of any service?" murmured Mr. Rodney, seeing the footman remaining blankly.

"Oh, thank you! It is only an extortionate cabman. If you will send him away."

"Certainly."

Mr. Rodney and James departed. The Duchess, the Lady Pearl, and Mrs. Verulam sat down.

"Southborough always defies the weather. He is like —was it Ajax, Pearl? you ought to know."

"I quite forget," Lady Pearl said mournfully.

Mr. Rodney came in again.

"It is quite right. Lord Birchington has gone," he said.

"Birchington! You do n't mean to tell me the fellow was my brother?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I fancied I knew his face. Then that quite accounts for the attempt at extortion. Birchington is always in difficulties, and I dare say cab-driving does n't pay too well. I hope, Mr. Rodney, you did n't give in to his demands?"

"Well, really—he seemed so convinced, that I—just a sixpence, you know."

"Dear, dear! That's the way to become poor, Mr. Rodney. You ought to take more care of your money, and not let my worthless brother prey on you. It's only two miles—not a step more. I'm so glad you are back from St. John's Wood, Mrs. Verulam. You were so difficult to get at there—even by omnibus."

"It was rather far out."

"And then the neighbourhood is hardly— However,

the Duke likes it, so I must n't say a word against it. I believe he had rooms there or something when he was only an eldest son. And he 's always going to see them, for 'auld lang syne,' you know. Yes, I will have some tea, thank you. No sugar! Gout, you know; gout! We all have it, even poor Pearl! That 's what depresses her so much."

"No, mother, it is not the gout—it is the sorrows of life."

"We must all feel that at times, I am sure," said Mr. Rodney, sympathetically.

"Not if we go to Carlsbad at regular intervals," said the Duchess, who was essentially a materialist. "But one can't always afford that."

"I would rather try a sisterhood," said the Lady Pearl.

"It would be cheaper," said the Duchess appraisingly.

"It would be more retired—more apart, mother. That is the point."

Mrs. Verulam glanced in an attracted manner at Lady Pearl.

"Ah," she said; "you, too, feel the hollowness of society."

Mr. Rodney looked painfully shocked.

"Society hollow!" he almost whispered.

"As a drum," said Lady Pearl, in a sepulchral voice. "I envy the woman to whom its doors are closed. That Mrs. Van Adam, for instance, of whom everyone is talking."

Mrs. Verulam turned scarlet, and Mr. Rodney looked gratified.

"My little paragraph seems to have been read," he murmured.

"Pearl," said the Duchess severely, "what should you know about such a person? My dear, you forget yourself."

Mrs. Verulam gasped and looked towards the door, through which at every instant she expected to see Chloe enter the room.

"Oh, Duchess," she said in agitated protest, "perhaps, after all, there is something to be said on her side. Mr. Van Adam may have—"

"Huskinson Van Adam is a splendid fellow from all I can gather," Mr. Rodney ventured to suggest, a little anxious lest Mrs. Verulam's unexpected charity should compromise her in the eyes of the Duchess. "I have been at some pains to learn the truth of the matter, and I am afraid that the evidence of the Crackers could leave no doubt in any unprejudiced mind."

"The Crackers, Mr. Rodney!" cried the Duchess in her loud voice. "What had the fifth of November to say to it?"

"Crackers, Duchess, answer to your Crofters in Florida, I believe."

"Really. How very absurd!"

"Oh, but," Mrs. Verulam interposed, losing her head in the agitation and apprehension of the moment, "it was Mr. Van Adam who set the Crackers, or Crofters, or whatever you call them, against his wife. Why, and even Boswell—"

She paused, confronted by faces of unutterable amazement. And in the pause the drawing-room door was flung open, the prim soprano voice of the faithful Marriner announced "Mr. Van Adam!" and in walked a dark young man in a tweed suit.

Mrs. Verulam half rose from her sofa, leaned one trembling hand upon the back of it, and, gasping quite

audibly, stared at the figure in the doorway, as a sceptic might stare when a ghost rises to convince him. The Duchess put up her eyeglasses with keen interest to take stock of the newcomer. The Lady Pearl looked decidedly less gouty than she had a moment before. And as for Mr. Rodney, he sat as if petrified with surprise at finding the veracity of his paragraph thus impugned in full publicity, and in his very presence. Meanwhile there was a sound of violent scrabbling upon the staircase as the faithful Marriner, for once entirely dismissed from composure, made haste to gain the seclusion of a back attic, in which she could go, without delay, into a supreme fit of hysterics. And the young gentleman in the tweed suit, his hands thrust into his pockets, surveyed the assembled multitude with eyes that seemed as if about to fall out of his head.

CHAPTER IV

THE TWEED SUIT

How long the silence lasted Mrs. Verulam was never able to determine. Nor in after days could she remember by which member of the party it was broken. As a matter of fact, however, it was the young gentleman in the tweed suit who spoke first. He took his hands out of his pockets with a sort of deliberate carefulness, walked jauntily into the room, and sharply whispered, in passing near the sofa against which poor little Mrs. Verulam was hopelessly reared up:

"Introduce me as my husband!"

Mrs. Verulam's lips were dry. Her head swam, and she saw various shapes, extremely bright in colour, dancing a sort of appalling polka before her eyes. Gazing steadily at these dancing shapes, she said, in a piercing voice:

"Duchess—Mr. Van Adam!"

Then she sat down upon the springy sofa in such wise that she moved several times up and down like a cork buoyed upon the waves of the sea. And all the time she thus emulated a cork she kept her eyes fixed upon the young man in the tweed suit, who appeared to rise and fall, or rather to elongate and to diminish in telescope fashion, while he bowed before the Duchess, and received in return a dignified and smiling salutation. But the sofa subsided into a calm, and Mrs. Verulam

was obliged to collect herself. Mr. Rodney was addressing her in an excited murmur:

"I had no idea, no notion at all, that you knew Mr. Van Adam."

"Oh, yes."

"Besides, I fully understood he was in Florida."

"Oh, no."

"This makes my paragraph all wrong."

"Oh, yes."

"It is really most unfortunate."

"Oh, no."

Mrs. Verulam felt like a pendulum, and that she would go on helplessly alternating affirmatives and negatives for the next century or two. But Mr. Rodney, who, being of a very precise habit, was seriously upset by being given the lie direct—in tweed, too, on a London afternoon of May!—repeated "Oh, no!" in accents of such indignant amazement that Mrs. Verulam was obliged to recover her equilibrium.

"Oh, yes, I mean," she said. "Oh, yes, yes, yes!"

This repetition signified the approach of hysteria. The young gentleman in the tweed suit rapidly intervened.

"My kind hostess's invitation lured me from my orange-groves," he said, in his deep contralto voice, fixing his large, dark eyes with a hypnotic expression upon Mrs. Verulam.

"Oh," the Duchess said, "then you are staying with Mrs. Verulam?"

"Yes," said the young gentleman, still looking at Mrs. Verulam.

"Oh, yes," she began feebly. "Oh, yes, yes—"

"Might I ask for a cup of tea, Mrs. Verulam?" he exclaimed, in what might, with but slight exaggeration, be called a voice of thunder.

"Certainly," she answered, putting about fifteen lumps of sugar, with a shaking hand, into the nearest cup. "You do n't take sugar, I think?"

"Gouty?" said her Grace. "Ah, you and Pearl would sympathize. Let me introduce you to my girl. Mr. Van Adam—Lady Pearl McAndrew."

Bows.

"I am not gouty, mother," Lady Pearl said, in her morose voice. "I am only melancholy. And that"—she addressed herself to the tweed suit—"is because I cannot, I will not, blind myself to the actual condition of the world I see around me."

"Oh, my dear," said the Duchess, "Carlsbad would cure you. But," she added, to the tweed suit, "unfortunately, I can't afford to send her there just at present."

The Lady Pearl grew large with vexation, as people of sensitive nature will when, having elaborately surrounded themselves with an interesting atmosphere, they find it ruthlessly dissipated by a Philistine allusion to uric acid. She seemed about to make some almost apoplectic rejoinder, when Mr. Rodney mellifluously chipped in.

"I believe in the climate of Florida gout is practically unknown," he said, speaking obliquely towards the tweed suit. "My friend, Lord Bernard Roche—" he paused, expectant of some eager exclamation from the person whom Lord Bernard, in his letters, called "poor old Huskinson." But none came. "Lord Bernard Roche, now in New York—City—" he again paused, and once more in vain—"tells me so."

His conclusion was a trifle flurried. When we do n't get what we want in conversation we are apt to be put to confusion. Mr. Rodney looked very hard, indeed,

at the tweed suit, and then, although not introduced, added to it:

"I think you know Lord Bernard? He tells me so in his very charming and entertaining letters."

"Oh, yes—Lord Bernard—oh, yes, certainly," exclaimed the tweed suit, with a sudden flaring vivacity.

"A very sympathetic nature," Mr. Rodney continued, in softest music. "I am sure that you have found it so. A man to go to confidently in any trouble."

"Oh, certainly. Most undoubtedly yes."

The Duchess had caught Mr. Rodney's gracious innuendo, and she now chimed in, with her most basso-profundo manner:

"Ah, Mr. Van Adam! but in London you must forget all your troubles. London is the most cheerful place imaginable."

"Oh, mother!"

"Yes, Pearl, it is for a healthy person. No doubt," to the tweed, "you are staying for the season?"

The tweed looked towards Mrs. Verulam, and then, after a perceptible pause, answered:

"Yes."

"Well, then," continued her Grace, who was aware of Huskinson Van Adam's millionaire propensities, "you will soon be quite cheerful again, I'll warrant. You have been over before, I suppose?"

"In Paris. I know Paris quite well, but not London."

"Paris is horrible," said the Lady Pearl. "The Bois de Boulogne makes me sick."

Mr. Rodney's smooth hair nearly stood on end. Hearing Paris decried was to his social and orthodox nature like blasphemy to the ears of an exceptionally pious Pope. Such sayings ran in his veins like ice-cold

water, and almost gave him pneumonia. But, ere he could utter his illness, another personality was added to the group in Mrs. Verulam's drawing-room. This was a round and swart young man, with spectacles, short legs, and a conceited manner. Probably he was announced by the footman. But he seemed simply to be in the room, to have greeted everyone except the tweed s. it, to have sat down, taken a cup of tea, and said, "Paris is the only place in the world!" before a person desirous of doing so could exclaim "Knife!"

Such was the rapidity of that ardent creature—Mr. Ingerstall, artist and egoist.

"Paris, I repeat," he reiterated, looking all round him, and speaking with a clipping utterance, "is the only place in the world."

And he began to drink his tea with extraordinary swiftness of absorption. No man on earth could assimilate a liquid in a shorter space of time than Mr. Ingerstall. In his hands the commonest actions assumed the dignity of feats. In his mouth the most ordinary remarks took on an aspect of Mount Sinai.

Mr. Rodney breathed again. Paris had found a defender. The Lady Pearl did not appear angry at being contradicted. She was accustomed to it, and custom is everything. She looked mildly at Mr. Ingerstall and said:

"Really!"

Mr. Ingerstall handed his cup to Mrs. Verulam in order that it might be refilled. Then staring hard at the tweed suit, towards whom, as a stranger, he thought it fit to address his educational remarks, he cried:

"Really! There is no art except in Paris, no possibility of dining out of Paris, no good dressmaker beyond the limits of Paris, no perfect language except the perfect

language of Paris, no gaiety, no verve, no acting, no dancing, no love-making worthy of the name, but in Paris!"

"Then, Mr. Ingerstall, why on earth do you always live in London?" the Duchess said heavily.

"Because I find more caricatures there," said Mr. Ingerstall, taking the second cup of tea from Mrs. Verulam's hands with the manner of a conjurer at the head of his profession.

And again he stared at the tweed suit; then he turned to Mrs. Verulam and exclaimed:

"Please introduce me to that gentleman."

"Mr. Ingerstall—Mrs.—Mr. Van Adam," said Mrs. Verulam.

It seemed to her that everybody in London was in her drawing-room intent on the acquaintance of the hybrid friend who had brought her to such confusion. Nevertheless, she found some comfort in the fact that, so far, the tweed suit was accepted as genuine. But Mr. Ingerstall's eyes were terribly sharp; and, then, he wore spectacles. And what can be hidden from a vision naturally acute, and aided by glasses of enormous power? Mrs. Verulam trembled.

"You know Paris?" said Mr. Ingerstall to the tweed suit.

"Yes; quite well."

"You agree with me, then?"

"Certainly," said the tweed suit, moving rather uneasily under the piercing gaze of the artist.

Mr. Ingerstall's swart face was irradiated with a triumphal grin, which was distinctly simian. He turned to the Duchess: "There, your Grace," he said; "you see there are others of my opinion."

"Ah! but Mr. Van Adam does n't know London yet," the Duchess retorted.

"Then I'll show it him!" cried Mr. Ingerstall, with a glee that was diabolic. "I'll show him Madame Tussaud's, the Piccadilly fountain, the mosaics—heaven preserve us all!—in St. Paul's 'glowing with life and colour,' as the poor, dear Chapter expresses it, the Royal Academy—at its very best this year—the sublime architecture of Buckingham Palace, the restaurants out of which you are turned at half-past twelve, after mumbling the final course of your abbreviated supper by the light of a tallow-candle. Oh, I'll show Mr. Adams London!"

"Van Adam," interposed Mr. Rodney, restoratively.

"Mr. Van Adam, London. Will you come with me?"

He thrust this last remark at the tweed suit, which replied, in a rather muffled voice:

"Thank you very much."

"That's settled then," said Mr. Ingerstall, hastily devouring a lozenge-shaped cake covered with pink sugar; "and then we'll see, Duchess, whether this gentleman does n't swear by blessed Paris to the end of his life."

"Oh, really, Mr. Ingerstall, you ought to go to the Morgue instead of to heaven when you die," her Grace rejoined tartly, as she turned, with great deliberation, to Mrs. Verulam. "What are your plans for the season, Mrs. Verulam? Are you going to Ascot?"

Mr. Rodney looked at his boots and endeavoured modestly to conceal the simple and unostentatious fact that he felt himself a hero. Mrs. Verulam hesitatingly replied:

"I have n't thought much about it as yet."

But this was too much for Mr. Rodney. To be snatched suddenly from the summit of a candlestick and incontinently shovelled away under a bushel is an event calculated to rouse the temper of the very mildest

flaneur who ever wore polished boots. Mr. Rodney's fiddle-face assumed a sudden look of stern resolution, and in a voice a trifle louder than usual, he almost exclaimed:

"Mrs. Verulam has secured, through me, the finest house in the neighbourhood of the course."

"If you want to go racing, you really ought to run across the Channel and go to Longchamps," began Mr. Ingersall, with intense rapidity.

But the Duchess had had enough of him, and when the Duchess had had enough of anybody, she could be like a park of artillery and a stone wall combined. She could both decimate and offer a blank and eyeless resistance to attack. On the present occasion she preferred to become a stone wall to the chattering artist, and, presenting to him the entirety of her back, she said, with animation, to Mr. Rodney:

"Indeed! Which house d' you mean?"

"Ribton Marches," that gentleman responded, in a way that was nearly unbridled.

"The Bun Emperor's palace!" exclaimed her Grace, in a thrilling bass. "Mrs. Verulam, you are a public benefactor. Is Mr. Van Adam to be of your party?"

Mrs. Verulam looked helplessly across at the tweed suit, as if for orders. Apparently she received them, for she suddenly said, "Yes," with a jerk.

The Duchess glanced from the sombre countenance of the Lady Pearl to the tweed suit. It was evident, from her protuberant eyeballs, that her mind was busily at work.

"Ribton Marches is a palace," she continued; "it would hold a regiment."

"Oh!" interposed Mr. Rodney, "I scarcely think that Mr. Lite would care to entertain a—"

"I know Mr. Lite very well," the Duchess interrupted; "a most worthy, generous man. He has given me thousands of buns from time to time."

"Does your Grace eat so many?" said the rasping voice of Mr. Ingerstall from behind. "If you wish to get a really perfect bun, go to the Maison—"

"For the school-children on the Duke's estates," the Duchess continued, inflexibly. "It has been a very great saving for us; and, in return, all we have had to do is to let the good man use our names in his advertising processes. 'Your buns are exquisite'—the phrase was mine. You can see it in the *Daily Telegraph* any day."

At the phrase, "your buns are exquisite," the phantom of a superior smile flitted beneath the shadow of Mr. Rodney's sinister moustache. He was thinking of the choice bit of prose to which the name of Lady Sophia Tree was so soon to be appended.

"Have you made up your house party yet?" the Duchess proceeded blandly to Mrs. Verulam.

"Not yet. Indeed"—here Mrs. Verulam shot a rather cruel glance out of her gray eyes at Mr. Rodney—"indeed, the matter of my having the house—"

"The palace," interjected the Duchess.

"Is scarcely finally settled yet."

"I clinch it to-night at the Crystal Palace," murmured Mr. Rodney, through his teeth.

"The Crystal Palace!" cried Mr. Ingerstall; "there's a glass house at which everybody should throw stones. Burmese warriors made of chocolate, or something of the kind, plaster statues of Melancholy, sardines in boxes, mixed up with jet bracelets and bicycle exhibitions, a concert-room like a fourth-rate swimming-bath, a—but you shall see it," he cried to the tweed suit, who again replied hastily:

"Thank you very much."

"If your party is not made up, Mrs. Verulam," the Duchess resumed, "I am sure the Duke and I and Pearl will be most happy to join it."

"Indeed, mother," said the Lady Pearl, grievously, "I do not wish—"

"My dear, nonsense; it will do your gout a great deal of good breathing the pine-laden air, if Mrs. Verulam can find room for you—"

"I shall be delighted," said Mrs. Verulam, whose mental condition at the moment rendered her quite prepared to accept any proposition, even of murder or arson, that might be made to her.

"Then that is settled," the Duchess said briskly, rustling the skirt of her gown as a signal of her imminent departure. "It will be an advantage to you to have me at Ribton Marches, because I know all the ins and outs of the place. The Duke and I lunched there with Mr. Lite to sign our little token of approbation of his buns, and he showed me everything. Well, really, we must be getting on. Come, Pearl—"

The Lady Pearl rose wearily. Her face still expressed either a tendency to gout or an understanding of life; but it must be confessed that, as she looked towards the tweed suit and bowed a dignified farewell, a trace of animation crept into her manner, and she looked more distinctly less respectable than the Duchess than she had on her entry into Mrs. Verulam's drawing-room. The Duchess cordially shook the tweed suit's hand at parting.

"Come and see us," she said vigorously.

"Many thanks."

"Come to-morrow."

The reply was rather faint, "With pleasure."

"Mrs. Verulam will give you our address—Belgrave Square. You can get a bus from the corner of Hamilton Place that will put you down at—oh, but of course that does n't matter to you. I wish the Duke had an orange-grove. Good-bye, Mr. Ingerstall."

She looked him over meditatively; then she said:

"Perhaps you won't mind just coming out with us to hail a—thank you very much. Good-bye."

She proceeded out of the room, followed by Lady Pearl and Mr. Ingerstall, the latter of whom turned sharply at the door to say to the tweed suit:

"Very well, then; I'll come to-morrow morning to show you London, and increase your commendable love of Paris. Ah! when you see the mosaics—mercy on us!"

He shot out of the room with his short arms raised towards heaven. A moment later they heard his voice piercingly hailing a bus outside for the Duchess.

Meanwhile Mr. Rodney was being terribly *de trop*. Mrs. Verulam had now come to what is called the end of the tether. She wanted to bounce up from her sofa, take Mr. Rodney by the shoulders, thrust him forcibly out of the house, and then go into violent hysterics. This was what she wanted to do. What she had to do was to sit quiet and see him becoming suspicious, and, finally, jealous of the tweed suit, which also wanted to go into hysterics. Mr. Rodney was considerably exercised, first, by finding that he had apparently told a lie in the *World*; secondly, by being made suddenly aware that Mrs. Verulam had a male friend of whom she had never spoken to him, and, moreover, a friend so intimate that she summoned him from the orange-groves of Florida to stay alone with her in London, all divorced as he was. All this greatly perturbed him, and so soon as the

Duchess was gone he promised himself the pleasure of probing, with his usual exquisite dexterity, into the problem so abruptly presented to him. He therefore sat tight, and began to look very observant. Mrs. Verulam was gripped by the cold hands of despair. She forced a faded smile.

"You must n't forget your engagement at the Crystal Palace, Mr. Rodney," she said, with a terrible effort after sprightliness.

Mr. Rodney grew wrinkled, a habit of his when forced into painful thought.

"I am not likely to forget any detail of my service to you," he said, with a pressure that tended in the direction of emphasis. "But we do not dine till half-past eight."

"The trains are very slow on that line, I believe," Mrs. Verulam added, with a vagueness as to the different railway systems that would have made her fortune as a director.

"Still, they do not take three hours to do the six miles," said Mr. Rodney, with a distinct approach to sarcasm.

Mrs. Verulam collapsed. There was no more fight left in her. She shut her eyes very tightly and tried not to breathe hard. When she opened them again Mr. Rodney was looking at the tweed suit in a very crafty manner.

"I have heard much of you, Mr. Van Adam," he said, slowly.

"Indeed!"

"Yes. I have even had the pleasure of writing a little word about you."

The tweed suit started.

"May I ask where?"

Mr. Rodney laid his long, white hand gently upon the *World*.

"Here."

The word dropped from him like a pebble. The tweed suit flushed scarlet, and its dark eyes darted a look of boyish fury upon the demure writer of paragraphs. But it only said, in a voice that slightly shook:

"Indeed!"

"May I have the pleasure of showing you?" said Mr. Rodney, gently unfolding the journal for men and women, and laying one finger upon the Van Adam paragraph. The tweed suit pretended to read it carefully. "You will notice a slight mistake at the close," Mr. Rodney continued, in a resentful voice, and glancing from the tweed suit to Mrs. Verulam and back again. "It would not have crept in" (errors have no other gait than that generally attributed to the insect world) "had I known that we were to have the unexpected pleasure of welcoming you to London."

"Thank you very much."

Mr. Rodney had now set foot upon the path of magnanimity. He bit his lower lip, and took another step upon it.

"I shall be glad to rectify my error next week," he said.

"I am obliged to you."

"In the meanwhile, anything that I can do to render your short"—he paused interrogatively; there was no rejoinder, and he continued—"stay among us agreeable, I shall be only too happy to accomplish."

The tweed suit bowed convulsively, and Mrs. Verulam began to breathe audibly upon her sofa.

"Mitcing Dean," Mr. Rodney added, with a sense

of glorious martyrdom, "Mitching Dean is entirely at your service."

"Mitching Dean!" the tweed suit repeated, with a befogged intonation.

"Yes. Its butter, its roof, its roses—"

"Roses!" said the suit, as if trying to break an intolerable spell. "Ah! the English roses are exquisite! I have some dark-red ones in my room here."

Mrs. Verulam coughed sharply. Mr. Rodney's face grew a dull brick-red.

"Dark-red roses in your room?" he said. He looked rapidly at all the drawing-room vases, and then cast a pale and reproachful glance at Mrs. Verulam. Then he got up slowly. He felt that his investigation into the relations of the pretty widow and the divorced American orange-grower could not be pursued satisfactorily in such a moment of confusion and despair. He must have time for thought. To-night he would free himself as early as might be from the thralldom of the Bun Emperor. He would wander amid the japanned-tin groves of the Crystal Palace. He would seek the poetical solitude afforded by an exhibition of motor-cars, or plunge into the peaceful villages of the chocolate-hued and inanimate Burmese. To-night! to-night! He must think; he must collect himself; he must reason; he must plan.

"My train," he murmured a little frantically; "I must catch it. I must go! I must, indeed!"

He spoke as if multitudes were endeavouring to hold him, and keep him back from a stern purpose. He pressed Mrs. Verulam's hand. "Cruel!" he murmured. He bowed to the tweed suit. "Au revoir!" He was at the door. "My train! Good-bye!" He was gone, and instantly Mrs. Verulam on her sofa, the tweed suit on its chair, were in violent hysterics.

Had Mr. Rodney left his hat behind by mistake and returned to fetch it, he must have stood on the threshold petrified. As there is often a method in madness, so there is sometimes a hilarity in hysteria. There is the frantic laughter of the human soul making a sudden and distracted exit from the prison in which it has been gradually accumulating a frightful excess of emotion. It leaps out with hyæna cry, and with the virulent cachinnations of a thing inhuman. Mrs. Verulam's shriek of laughter as the hall door closed behind Mr. Rodney's thin back was far more terrible than Chloe Van Adam's burst of tears. It flew up like a monstrous and horrible balloon, seeming to take form, to sway, to swell as a gas-filled bladder, to burst with a tearing desperation, to die down in a chuckle of agony. And as the laughter of Mrs. Verulam faded with the sharp swiftness of hysteria into a flood of tears, the tears of Chloe Van Adam bloomed into a shriek of laughter. The two women took it in turns, as the children say, to leap to the opposite poles of emotion, until the footman James, below stairs, the faithful Marriner above, heard and trembled.

But all things must have an end, and at last the waves of tumult receded and receded, the laughter leaped lower, the sobs subsided, and presently an awful silence reigned, broken only by the sound of female pants—not the rustle of rational dress, but the murmur of escaping breaths, long, bronchial, and persistent. And then even these died away, till you might have heard the note of the falling pin upon the receptive carpet.

"Chloe!"

"Daisy!"

"Oh, oh, oh!"

"Ah, ah, ah!"

"Oh, do n't—do n't, or I shall begin again."

"So shall I! Oh, let us keep quiet. Oh, do let us—oh, do let us—oh—"

"Hush!" cried Mrs. Verulam. And suddenly she sprang up, went over to the tweed suit, clasped it in her arms and kissed it. "There, there!" she said; "it's all over now. Oh, but why did you do it?"

"But why did you say that nobody would be let in?"

"I told Francis I was out. He must have forgotten to tell James. He shall leave me to-morrow."

"And I thought I would give you a little surprise."

"You did! You did! When I saw you at the door I thought I should have died!"

"And I wanted to be elsewhere."

"And Marriner! The extraordinary noise she made running upstairs. She fell down twice, I heard her."

Mrs. Verulam leaned against Chloe and laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks, but this time with honest merriment. And Chloe echoed her with a delicious emulation. That gaiety did them good. A sense of humour is often salvation. And, indeed, they might have been laughing now, had not their silver joviality been arrested by a flat-handed thump on the drawing-room door. They stopped and looked at each other. The flat-handed thump was repeated.

"Who on earth can this be?" whispered Mrs. Verulam, apprehensively. "Come in!"

The door stole open and the faithful Marriner appeared, with twisted features, red eyes, and betouzled hair.

"Oh, ma'am!" she said. "Oh, my! Oh, dear, oh!"

She advanced into the room with her poor feet turned in, and wringing her horrified hands. Her black dress was torn at the knees, showing how she had fallen as

she scrambled atticwards. Mrs. Verulam looked at the dress, remembered once more the noise of the tumbles, and laughed again till the tears ran out of her eyes.

"Poor Marriner!" she said. "Poor, dear Marriner! Mr. Van Adam, Marriner!" (She mimicked the voice of announcement.) "Mr. Van Adam!"

The faithful Marriner's complexion turned a blackish gray.

"Oh, ma'am, forgive me—forgive me!" she cried.

In another minute she might have been led to go back upon the whole course of her education, and to utter some such damning exclamation as "I did n't go for to do it!" but mercifully Chloe averted that imminent calamity by saying:

"There, there, Marriner! Never mind. I made you. It was all my fault. Besides, there is no serious harm done. At least, is there Daisy?"

And she turned reflectively to Mrs. Verulam.

"Please shut the door, Marriner," Mrs. Verulam said.

The faithful Marriner did so, and then returned, still on turned-in, deplorable feet.

"And now let us be quite calm, and consider," Mrs. Verulam said. "Marriner, you may sit down for a moment."

Marriner sank upon the edge of a chair, and tried to fold her hands respectfully, but failed. She could not so soon command her body.

"Nobody recognised you, Chloe," said Mrs. Verulam; "not even Mr. Ingerstall?"

"Horrid little man! No!"

"They all think you your husband?"

"Yes, they take me for Huskinson." A light sprang up in her eyes. "In fact, so far as they are concerned, I am a man!"

"Tcha, tcha, tcha!" clicked Marriner, making the condemnatory noise so dear to limited natures in moments of tension or surprise.

"Oh, Daisy, I wonder, would it be possible—"

She stopped and looked doubtfully at Marriner.

"Marriner is absolutely to be trusted," Mrs. Verulam answered to the look.

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" said the faithful one, beginning gradually to recover.

"Well, then—could I not? No, Daisy, I must speak to you alone! I know that Marriner will keep the secret of this afternoon."

"Oh, ma'am, with my best blood!" cried Marriner, vaguely quoting from historical novels, but meaning well.

She got up, gained the door, turned, repeated in a high voice, "With my best blood, ma'am!" and went softly out.

"Well, Chloe, what is it?"

"Did n't you tell me you longed to get out of society and could n't?"

"Yes. I long to get out gracefully, and—er—just a little bit later in the season. You see, dear, there's the Ascot house, and the Duke and Duchess coming. I must stay in the cage till the race week's over."

And Mrs. Verulam looked at Chloe a little awkwardly, all the problems presented by the Florida divorce suit returning upon her.

"And I must stay in it, too, just—just till that lovely week's over," Chloe said, with a coaxing accent. "Just till then, Daisy. I must see the Bun Emperor's palace, and Mr. Pettingham's coloured slides, and the Prince and Princess, and Sartorius—oh, I must! I must!"

"But how?"

"As Huskinson."

"What?"

Mrs. Verulam's voice grew shrill. But Chloe was persistent.

"Why not?" she urged, with tender cunning. "You see I can do it. Nobody will recognise me. Huskinson has never been in London, and has no London friends. Women have lived as men before me. I read of one in the papers who was a sailor for forty years without being discovered, and of another who fought in battles, and got drunk, and swore, and was a man in every way."

"My dear Chloe, you must n't drink! Oh, but it's impossible!"

"No; but listen. It's heaven-sent—this mistake, I mean. I only intended to show you alone I could be a man. But now, Daisy, you want to get out of society! I want to get into it. We can do it together—one go in, one get out, like the little man and woman in the cardboard barometer. Let me stay here as Huskinson. You can compromise yourself harmlessly with me, and I can have a good time just for a month or two, just till after Ascot, anyway."

"You will have to see the mosaics!" said Mrs. Verulam.

"I'll bear that. I'll bear anything. The game is worth the candle. Oh, yes, it is. And then, after Ascot, I'll vanish—you'll perhaps be dropped. It's a perfect plan. Now, is n't it? Is n't it?"

"Really, it is not bad," said Mrs. Verulam. "Yes, I might get out of the cage through you, and yet preserve my self-respect."

"Of course you might. I say it's heaven-sent."

"Heaven-sent—but Francis!"

This sudden *cri de cœur* alarmed Chloe for her friend's reason.

"Heaven—Francis!" she said, helplessly.

What could such words mean but that poor Daisy's reason was tottering upon its throne?

"The footman who let you in when you arrived! The footman who shall leave my service to-morrow. How to keep his mouth shut! Wait! Did anyone else see you?"

"Not a creature."

Mrs. Verulam knit her pretty brows.

"Francis loves Marriner," she said, in an inward voice of subtle meditation. "Francis loves Marriner."

She paused.

"Does he? Why?"

"I can't think, but he does. It is n't only that Marriner told me so, but he did himself; so I suppose it's true. Chloe, if we are to do this dreadful thing, Francis's affection must be played upon."

"It sounds like a flower and a hose."

"It's a footman's heart and a woman's cleverness. Marriner shall accept Francis on the condition of his keeping our secret from everyone, especially from James."

"I see. It's all perfect. Oh, except my clothes!"

"Your clothes! Why, you've got them on!"

"But only these! I must have frock coats, lavender pants—trousers, I mean—silk hats, claw hammers, and—and—well, you know, Daisy, other things. I can't have a man to measure me; at least, can I?"

Mrs. Verulam thought silently for a moment. Then she said: "You must be ill."

"Why?"

"For a day or two. Your tweed shall go to a first-rate tailor. Francis—Francis has been valet to the Marquis of Greenbank. He'll know all about that.

We 'll measure your head in bed, and get the hats. Yes, yes, we 'll manage it all. Poor Mr. Rodney!"

A mischievous smile, the true little grin of the coquette, curled her sweet lips.

"They were his roses I put into your room, Chloe," she said.

And Chloe laughed and echoed, "Poor Mr. Rodney!" Then she added, "And James Bush, dear?"

Mrs. Verulam blushed.

"Come, dear, it is time for you to be ill," she said hastily. And she took the tweed suit affectionately by the waist and led it from the room.

CHAPTER V

CHLOE WAITS FOR HER TROUSERS

"Kindly tell Mr. Van Adam that I have come to take him to St. Paul's Cathedral to see the mosaics," cried Mr. Ingerstall, at three o'clock on the following afternoon, to the smiling Francis.

"Mr. Van Adam is ill in bed, sir."

"Ill in bed!" shrieked Mr. Ingerstall. "What with?"

"I could n't say, sir."

And the smile of Francis widened till it nearly touched the ears on either side of his head. Mr. Ingerstall looked very angry indeed. When he had arranged to show a man an atrocity at a certain fixed hour, he considered that man ought to be well enough to see it.

"I do n't understand this at all," he snapped. "When did Mr. Van Adam go to bed?"

"Yesterday afternoon, sir. Very soon after you left, sir."

"He looked quite well."

"That was an accident, sir."

"An accident! What d' you mean?"

"His looking well when he was ill, sir."

Mr. Ingerstall glared up at Francis through his enormous spectacles, as if he would read the footman's soul. Having read it, he could make nothing of it. So he darted one fat hand into his pocket, snatched out a card-case, extracted a card with lightning dexterity, gave it

to Francis, exclaimed, "I shall call to show Mr. Van Adam the mosaics to-morrow at three precisely!" and marched away with immense rapidity, throwing sharp glances around him at all the passers-by, and rolling his broad little body as if accommodating himself to the turbulent waters of the Bay of Biscay. Francis went on smiling upon the doorstep for the space of a moment, and was just about to retreat into the hall and close the front door, when a private cab, painted very dark green and black, drove up, and the long face of Mr. Rodney peered forth over the apron.

"Is Mrs. Verulam at home?" he asked, plaintively.

Francis stepped out to the pavement.

"She is not at home, sir, but I can ask if she will see you, sir."

"Please do so," said Mr. Rodney. "I have some important news for her."

Francis retired, and came back in a moment to say that Mrs. Verulam would receive Mr. Rodney. The latter released himself from his hansom, bearing a quantity of carnations from Mitching Dean, and ascended the stairs, wearing on his countenance a carefully prepared expression of almost defiant resignation. He found Mrs. Verulam, in a delightful robe of palest primrose silk, sitting at her writing-table, and holding in her hand a pen which had that moment traced the magic words, "My dear Mr. Bush." She smiled at him in her most cordial manner as she accepted his flowers.

"Carnations," she said.

"From Mitching Dean."

"They are lovely. Thank you so much!"

"Not at all. May I venture to hope that—that they are worthy of a place in your own room?"

"I will have them put in water there at once."

She rang the bell and gave the bouquet to Francis with orders that the faithful Marriner was at once to dispose the flowers about her boudoir. Mr. Rodney's face expressed a gentle relief. He almost permitted himself the luxury of a cheerful smile as he sat down and prepared to unfold his last new mission.

"I was just writing the invitations for my Ascot party," Mrs. Verulam said lightly.

"Ah, it was about that I ventured to call," said Mr. Rodney, with a thin animation. "Last night I succeeded in my endeavour. I put the corner-stone to my temple of negotiations. I clinched the bargain with Mr. Lite."

"How good of you! What was the dinner like?"

Mr. Rodney went a little pale, and hurried on:

"But there are one or two conditions. I wanted to speak with you about them."

"Oh," said Mrs. Verulam, going to a drawer and taking out an envelope. "Here is mamma's signature to the praise of the buns. There was nothing else, was there?"

"Thank you very much," said Mr. Rodney, taking it carefully. "It will be all right. But I must tell you"—he lowered his voice impressively—"that Mr. Lite is a man of singularly tenacious affections."

"Indeed!"

"I scarcely knew how tenacious until—well, until we were wandering among the steel-knife exhibits last night after dinner."

Mrs. Verulam involuntarily shuddered.

"For it was only then that he was moved fully to unbosom himself to me, fully to reveal the depths of a peculiar—I may say, a very peculiar character."

Mr. Rodney paused, as if to choose his words, and then resumed:

"I gathered then that the soul of Mr. Lite is the— the residence of two masterful passions, the one a keen desire to obtain the very best names in England as signatures in praise of his—er—his wares, the other an affection amounting—yes, really, I may say, amounting almost to fury, for what he calls 'the home.' Now, as you may suppose, on an occasion such as that of last evening, these two extraordinary passions found themselves in opposition—in acute opposition."

"How terrible!"

"It really was. There were moments, I must confess, in which I should have been relieved if the present exhibition at the Crystal Palace had been of a somewhat different nature. However, nothing of that kind happened, I am thankful to say."

Mrs. Verulam assented, and he continued, softly:

"And, indeed, Lady Sophia's name won the day. That I may tell you at once. But having indulged the former of his two passions, Mr. Lite became suddenly the slave—to some extent, only to some extent—of the latter. And this is what I wish to consult you about."

"Yes."

"He will, with his devoted wife—'the wife,' as he somewhat exclusively calls her; he has no family—turn out of 'the home' for the space of six clear days, Monday to Saturday inclusive; but he cannot bring himself to leave the neighbourhood or to allow a strange staff of servants to intrude into Ribton Marches. Therefore he makes, or wishes to make, these conditions: that you retain his servants—there are plenty of them, I may tell you—to wait upon your party, and that you permit

him and 'the wife' to lodge for the week in a small fishing cottage that stands at the edge of a piece of artificial water beyond the small pine-wood at the outskirts of the grounds."

"Oh, Mr. Rodney, but—"

"He promises that they will regard the grounds as yours, and that, under no circumstances whatever, will they emerge from the seclusion of the fishing cottage."

Mrs. Verulam brightened up.

"Oh, under those conditions I have no objection. But it would be very unpleasant to have a man of violent temper prowling about and spying upon what my guests were doing in his garden or conservatories."

"Intolerable! intolerable! But the Bun Emperor is a man of his word, I feel sure; and, indeed, he offers to accept these conditions in black and white, and to sign his name to them if you wish it."

"Oh, dear, no!" Mrs. Verulam said hastily, with all a woman's usual dislike to anything business-like.

"Then that's comfortably arranged," Mr. Rodney said.

He looked at his boots for a couple of minutes, then glanced away and added:

"I hope your guest, Huskinson Van Adam, is well?"

Mrs. Verulam concealed a smile by looking very miserable suddenly.

"Indeed, I am sorry to say he not is at all well."

"Dear, dear!"

"In fact, he is in bed. He is not able to be up."

"I am grieved. What is the matter?"

"Nervous prostration."

"Following upon the shock of his wife's dreadful conduct, I suppose?"

"Possibly."

Mrs. Verulam stole a glance at Mr. Rodney, and continued, with gentle artfulness:

"I think he must love her still."

At these words Mr. Rodney brightened up wonderfully.

"Poor fellow!" he said; "poor fellow! I must get him up some melons from Mitching Dean. Americans like them. And the Mitching Dean melons are marvelously nourishing."

"It will be like your usual kind self."

Mr. Rodney bloomed into absolute vivacity under these gentle breezes of good-nature.

"And now," he said, "about the party. Ribton Marches will, as the Duchess says, hold a regiment. There are dozens of bedrooms, and the reception-rooms are very large."

"Oh," Mrs. Verulam said, "I only mean to have quite a little party—eight in all, including myself—four women and four men."

"Yes?"

"The Duchess, Lady Pearl, myself, the Duke, you, dear Mr. Rodney"—Mr. Rodney bowed happily—"Mr. Ingerstall, to worry the Duchess—you know how overwhelming she is if there is nobody about to worry her—Mr. James Bush, and Mr. Van Adam."

Mr. Rodney calculated gravely.

"But that is three ladies and five men," he said.

"No, indeed!" Mrs. Verulam grew red under the swift knowledge of her absurd mistake, and cried: "Oh, yes, of course. How stupid of me! That won't do, will it? Never mind; I'll ask Miss Bindler, Lord Kingsbridge's sister—you know how fond she is of racing—and someone else."

She was obviously confused for a moment. Mr. Rod-

ney attributed her condition to a wrong cause, prompted by the jealousy that almost habitually preyed upon him in regard to Mrs. Verulam. His mind instantly fastened upon the only name in the list that was totally unfamiliar to him.

"Mr. James Bush?" he murmured inquiringly.

Mrs. Verulam recovered herself promptly, but a curious shining look came into her gray eyes as she answered:

"Of the Farm, Bungay Marshes, Lisborough."

"Of the Farm, Bungay Marshes, Lisborough?"

"You have not heard of him?"

"I do n't think so. Which are his clubs?"

"His clubs? Oh, he does n't belong to any."

Mr. Rodney looked almost prostrated. A man who did n't belong to any clubs joining Mrs. Verulam's select little Ascot party at Ribton Marches!

"James Bush does not care for anything of that kind," Mrs. Verulam went on, with a thrill of something very like enthusiasm.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Rodney, with a frosty intonation of wonder.

"Oh, no; he never comes to London. Did I never mention him to you?"

"Never."

"I met him some time ago in the country, quite by chance," Mrs. Verulam said, airily.

"Really?"

"Yes. We fraternized."

"Oh!"

"I found him a most interesting, intelligent man, full of enthusiasm."

"Enthusiasm! How very odd!" Mr. Rodney said, as if to be full of enthusiasm were to be full of some extraordinary disease.

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"For his work."

"He is a workman?"

"He is a gardener—that is to say, he has a garden and a small farm, as he tells me. And he attends to them himself, with the help of an elderly labourer, Jacob Minnidick."

If it were possible for Mr. Rodney's long and fallow face to become more astounded than it had been during the progress of this conversation, it became so at the mention of this name.

"Jacob Minnidick!" he repeated in tones of flagrant amazement. "Jacob Minnidick!"

The name really laid him low, like a blow from the shoulder. He had never heard one like it before, and it seemed to take him straight into a different and dreadful world.

"Yes. Isn't it a pretty name? I am very much interested in Mr. Bush. It is he who has made me wish to give up society."

In her excitement Mrs. Verulam had spoken incautiously. She had hardly meant to go so far so soon. Mr. Rodney's veins suddenly swelled. His mouth opened, and he looked as if he were going to have some dreadful fit. He clenched his hands, and seemed to struggle for air. Mrs. Verulam was really terrified.

"Oh, Mr. Rodney, Mr. Rodney! what is it? what is it?" she exclaimed.

Mr. Rodney put up one long hand to his high collar, intruded a couple of fingers within its circle, and pulled it outwards, at the same time screwing his head rapidly from side to side. Mrs. Verulam was about to rush to the bell in terror when, with a convulsive effort, he collected himself.

"Please do n't," he said.

Mrs. Verulam did n't, but she was still very much alarmed.

"What is it? what is it?" she repeated. "Oh, please do tell me."

Mr. Rodney got up, walked to the window and back again, and then stood still.

"Made you wish to give up society!" he said, in a sepulchral voice. "Do you really mean that?"

"But surely that was not the reason of your seizure?"

"Indeed it was. Nothing else could have so affected me."

He spoke with the deepest feeling. Mrs. Verulam was almost touched.

"I am so sorry. But I thought it was physical."

He sat down again.

"An access occasioned by horror of mind," he said. "That you—that anyone, but most especially that you—should wish to give up society. What an appalling notion!" He put his hand up again to his collar, but withdrew it. "Horrible! Unnatural!" he murmured.

"I cannot agree with you," Mrs. Verulam said, recovering her composure.

He looked at her almost with fear.

"What—what is the meaning of this possession?" he said. "Who is this man, this person—Bush?"

Mrs. Verulam flushed angrily.

"Please do n't speak of my friends like that," she said.

"I beg your pardon. I will go. I had better go. I must have air—I must have air."

And he rose and tottered out, leaving Mrs. Verulam in a state of mingled indignation and alarm. She went to the window, and saw Francis assisting him into the black-and-green cab. His upward movements to reach the step were like those of one decrepit with age. When

the cab had driven slowly away in the direction of Piccadilly, she sat down at the writing-table and went on with her interrupted note.

"MY DEAR MR. BUSH:

"I remember very well, when we met at Basildene on that unforgettable day when you were helping my friend Mrs. Ringden to swarm her bees—is that the right expression?—you told me of your righteous hatred against the doings of society, and expressed your unalterable determination never to enter what is, ridiculously enough perhaps, called the gay world. Nevertheless, I want to persuade you to take a little holiday from your noble labour of working in your garden and seeing after your farm at Bungay, and to join me at Ascot in June for the race week. I see a 'No' rising to your lips. But wait a moment before uttering it. Let me tell you first that, moved by weariness of my empty life in town, and stirred by your example and your maxims—'There's nought like peapodding,' etc.—I intend to retire from society at the end of June, and to emulate your beautiful intimacy with Mother Nature. This Ascot party is practically my farewell, and my beginning of better things. Confidently, therefore, I summon you to be present at Ribton Marches, Sunninghill, Berks, from Monday to Saturday, June the — to the —, to support me in my determination, and assist me with your advice as to my future and more useful and fruitful life. Do not refuse. Mr. Minnidick will, I am certain, look after everything carefully in your absence, and I shall be really hurt if you say no. With kindest regards,

"Believe me,

"Yours very truly,

"DAISY VERULAM.

"P.S.—How is the garden looking, and how are the sheep? No more ewes coughing, I hope? But that marvellous preparation of yours—'Not Elliman,' I always call it—has prevented all that, I know."

Mrs. Verulam put this note into an envelope with an eager hand, addressed it to "The Farm, Bungay Marshes, Lisborough," sent it to the post, and then hastened, with glowing cheeks and bright eyes, to Chloe Van Adam's bedroom.

Chloe was in bed attended by the faithful Marriner, who had attained to that useful and beautiful age which permits a female to administer to a (supposed) suffering youth without the tongue of detraction being set instantly a-wagging. Nor could Mrs. Verulam's household, who laboured under the delusion that Chloe was her orange-growing husband, find much food for injurious gossip in the short and occasional visits—always chaperoned by Marriner—that the pretty hostess made to the chamber of her invalid guest. Having entered the room and carefully shut the door, Mrs. Verulam sat down by Chloe's bedside.

"Will those trousers never come?" cried the latter, with energy. "Oh, Daisy, it is dreadful to feel that I might be calling on a Duchess and that I am under a coverlet! This bed is like a grave. Do send Francis to tell that tailor to hurry up."

"Patience, dear. I am sure you will be able to go out to-morrow. I expect Mr. Ingerstall was in a fearful state of fury at your being too ill to see the mosaics to-day. He is afraid that you will grow to like London if you are snatched away from his influence."

"Horrid little creature! Oh, do tell me some news. It is so dreadful lying here. Has anything happened?"

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"Marriner," said Mrs. Verulam, "you may go on reading 'Studies in Pessimism,' if you like."

"I thank you, ma'am," said the faithful Marriner, eagerly opening her pocket Schopenhauer.

"Well, Chloe," pursued Mrs. Verulam; "in the first place, Mr. Rodney has just been having a sort of fit downstairs."

"Gracious! Is he epileptic?"

"No, only conventional."

"Does conventionality make people foam at the mouth?"

"Not exactly. But he really had a sort of convulsion when I told him that I intended to give up society. I was quite alarmed."

"You told him that?"

"Yes. I was carried away. You see, we had been speaking"—Mrs. Verulam lowered her voice—"of James Bush."

Chloe plunged on pillows so as to get a clearer view of her friend's face, on which she fixed her sparkling, boyish eyes with a merciless scrutiny.

"Ah!" she said. "Now tell me all about him. Who is he? What is he? Where is he?"

Mrs. Verulam clasped Chloe's hand on the quilt softly.

"Chloe," she said, "he is a man!"

"I gathered that. Very few women are called James."

"That's not enough. It is not a christening that makes a man, it is life."

The faithful Marriner looked up from her pocket Schopenhauer with respectful appreciation of this reasoned truth.

"Well, then, what life does he lead?" cried Chloe.

"A life of wholesome labour, of silent communion

with the earth—a life devoid of frivolity and devoted to meditation and sheep and bees and things of that kind."

The conclusion was a little vague, but the intention to praise was obvious, and Chloe was deeply interested.

"Meditation, sheep, bees," she repeated—"is n't all that what is called small culture?"

"Oh, indeed, there is nothing small about James Bush!" exclaimed Mrs. Verulam. "Oh, no! He is immense, powerful, calm! He is my idea of Agag!"

The faithful Marriner again glanced up. The word "Anak" trembled upon her well-informed lips, but respect for her mistress held her mum. Only a slight rustle betrayed the thrill of deep learning that ran through her.

"Really!" said Chloe. "Go on, dear."

"I met James Bush in the country at a time when I was just beginning fully to feel the emptiness of society."

"Emptiness! Oh, how can you?"

"I remember our first meeting so well," Mrs. Verulam continued, with a soft rapture of romance. "He came towards me with his head in a sort of meat-safe, holding in his strong hands the lid of a saucepan, upon which he beat with a wooden spoon with all his might and main."

Chloe sat up in bed and gasped.

"But why—why was he dressed so?" she asked.

"To protect him in his duties."

"What duties—among the sheep?"

"No, oh, no! He was swarming bees. Ah, how beautifully he swarms! If only these London creatures who call themselves men could see him!"

"I did n't know one person could swarm alone before. Go on, dear. Did he raise his meat-safe to you?"

"No. He took no notice of me at all, except to tell

me to get out of the way. That struck me directly. It was so different from what a London man would do!"

"I should say so. Gracious!"

"It was only afterwards that we talked, and that I learned what a man's life can and should be."

She glowed tenderly, and Chloe's suspicions were confirmed. She shuffled on the sheet towards her friend, and whispered in her right ear:

"Daisy, you 're in love with Mr. Bush."

The faithful Marriner hastily fluttered the pages of Schopenhauer's monumental work, endeavouring not to hear, and failing in the endeavour. Mrs. Verulam replied, after a short pause:

"I 'm not sure."

"I am!"

"Hush! I shall know at Ascot."

"Is he coming to Ribwick—? What is the Palace called?"

"Ribton Marches. Yes."

"How exciting! Oh, to think that you—"

She stopped and sighed, and, with woman's marvellous intuition, Mrs. Verulam knew that her mind was Huskinson-bound for the moment; that she saw once again the sands, the oranges, the crackers, and the razor-backs of far-off Florida; that she heard again the rattlesnakes of her sweet native land, singing their serenades to the peaceful alligator; that she played once more upon the wide veranda with the errant Boswell, and watched the sunset behind the curly pines with the baleful Bream. Yes, Mrs. Verulam divined all this, and, clasping her friend's hand, was silent, thinking of the many mysteries by which we are all surrounded, whether our lot be cast in Margate or in Maryland. When she spoke again, she said in a very low voice:

"I will confess to you that James Bush is a hero in my eyes. Whether he can ever be anything more to me I cannot tell. To me, Chloe, he is the embodiment of the life I mean to lead, the life of simplicity, in which everything has its value; the—the passing of—of a butterfly, the agony of a grasshopper, the swarming of a bee, the—the murmur of even the—the meanest owl that lives—"

"Are owls mean?"

"Yes. James Bush is the embodiment of the earth, from which we come, to which we go; the earth that we ought all to till and love, to delve in and to delight in. The earth! Dear Mother Earth!"

The faithful Marriner coughed discreetly, and Mrs. Verulam shut up, but not before Chloe had cried:

"I do n't think I like a man to be too earthy!"

Mrs. Verulam rose to go to her room and put some eau-de-cologne upon her forehead.

"Wait," she whispered, as she went. "Wait till you see him!"

"Marriner," said Chloe, "would you mind going to Francis, and asking him when I may expect my pants?"

CHAPTER VI

FATIMAH WAS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF HASCHISH

Mr. Rodney's condition of mind during, and for some time after, his drive from Mrs. Verulam's door in the black-and-green cab would scarcely afford fit subject for minute description. When a thoroughly estimable man ceases to take an interest in his "little place in the country," forgets whether he has put on the same pair of lavender gloves on two successive evenings or not, is careless about the set of his white tie, and totally unaware that his hair is unevenly parted when he is setting forth to the "crush" of a Countess, analysis should hold its merciless hand, psychology should veil its piercing eye. Suffice it, then, to say that Mr. Rodney was indeed sore smitten and afflicted by the terrible revelation of Mrs. Verulam's maniacal determination. To a man of his nature, life is society and society is life; the mode is to him what the burning bush was to Moses; the fashion of the day is the god in the car under whose wheels he loves to lie. Men, women, sorrows, joys, all people, all things, are but food for the sustenance of the deity whose rouged and powdered face looks down, like Jezebel's, from the lattices of a meretricious heaven, intent only on gaining an empty compliment, or a sly *aillade* from the worshipping world below. The thought that a woman who was not only in the fashion, but literally the fashion, a woman with whom he was in love, should

suddenly fall under an influence with a ridiculous name, hobnailed boots, and no club, rendered him almost imbecile with impotent agitation; and it is on record that he was seen in the late afternoon of the day of Mrs. Verulam's appalling deliverance, furiously pacing the Thames Embankment, and that at night he—how was never known—in some manner made his way to Clapham Common, upon which preposterous portion of the earth he wandered alone for nearly an hour and a half, uttering exclamations of despair, and making crude and tragic gestures.

Such deeds as these sufficiently proclaim the extraordinary condition to which he was reduced. But there was more to come. Three days later he departed to Mitching Dean, in the very top of the season, and he might perhaps have been there at this moment, forgotten and clean gone out of recollection, had not a violent telegram from Mr. Lite, the Bun Emperor, summoned him back to town. The telegram ran as follows:

“Where the devil is Lady Sophia Tree's bun praise?
—PERRY LITE.”

On receipt of this despairing cry, Mr. Rodney started from the hammock in which he was sulking upon the Mitching Dean lawn like one distraught. He remembered his obligations, and to him obligations were sacred things. In his despair he had thrust Lady Sophia's delicate tribute—his tribute, indeed!—to the Lite buns into the pocket of one of his frock-coats, and there it doubtless remained in darkness, instead of blazing forth, heavily “leaded,” in the most popular paper of the day. Now, this frock-coat was up in town. Accordingly, Mr. Rodney ordered round the brougham, drove to the Mitching Dean station—often alluded to by him in con-

versation as "my bijou station at Mitching Dean"—and took the train to town to do his duty by Mr. Lite. Once there, he remained. Upon his hall table in Grosvenor Place he found a sacred assemblage of invitations to the very best houses. He looked into his vellum-bound and silver-clasped "engagement" book, and discovered that Mr. Pettingham summoned him to the Unattached Club to see views of the Holy Land and to hear a lecture that very night. And he heard all around him the murmur of the monster that he loved, licking its lips over its repast of pleasure. His procedure, therefore, was as follows: He extracted the bun praise from the frock-coat and forwarded it at once to Ribton Marches, with many an explanation and apology. He then accepted "with pleasure" all the invitations which he had found upon his table, and, finally, he made a careful toilet, dined quietly, and, stepping into the green-and-black cab, ordered his coachman to drive him to the Unattached Club.

As he rolled thither on india-rubber tires he wondered whether he should meet Mrs. Verulam. She used to go there. And, indeed, everybody invariably went to Mr. Pettingham's parties, which were intensely smart, as well as slightly educational in tone. But the deadly influence that emanated from the Farm, Bungay Marshes, Lisborough, might have deterred the pretty widow from adhering to her usual habit upon this occasion. Mr. Rodney's long limbs trembled in the cab until the horse began to gallop, under the impression that only the most rapid motion could save it from an earthquake imminent at its back. If Mrs. Verulam should have already yielded to the baleful and hypnotic powers of the man Bush, should have already died to the only life worth living!

The galloping horse was thrown violently upon its haunches. The brilliant light above the door of the Unattached Club shone upon the twisted face of Mr. Rodney. He was compelled to recollect himself, and to get out. Still trembling with unwonted agitation, he made his way downstairs to the magnificent suite of apartments in the area retained by the enthusiastic Mr. Pettingham for his popular gatherings. A door was thrown open, and he found himself in the pitch dark, and in an atmosphere of heat that was almost suffocating. By this atmosphere Mr. Rodney knew that the room was packed with women of title. He could not see them, but the very great difficulty he experienced in drawing breath proved to him that they were there in this black well, on the threshold of which he was standing. He realized them, and he also realized that he had arrived rather late, more especially when he perceived at some distance off a pale circle of light, rather resembling a theatrical moon that had sat up late too many nights running, and heard a small and quacking voice say:

"I very much regret that, owing to a slight accident, resulting in a serious injury to my Jerusalem, I am unable to show my views of the Holy Land this evening. I shall therefore substitute for them my slides of Morocco, and shall tell you a few of my recent experiences while travelling with my very good friends, Prince Carl of Schmelzig-Heinstein and the Duke of Drigg, through the far-famed land of the Moors."

The quacking voice paused to allow a murmur of "Charming! charming!" to rise like incense out of the darkness, and then added:

"The Palestine soup, which you will presently find upon the supper menu, will, I fear, not strike you as

appropriate in the changed circumstances. I regret that there has been no time to substitute for it some potage Tetuan. You will now see the Prince, the Duke, and myself, as we appeared when in the act of *landing at Tangier.*"

The quacking voice hurled out these last three words with impressive emphasis. Under cover of them Mr. Rodney, who, from old experience, knew the plan of the room, glided down the two steps from the door, and crawled with infinite precaution among the invisible duchesses in search of a seat. For Mr. Pettingham's lectures were long, and his slides were often slow to appear when summoned with a duck-like "Hey, presto!" Now, as Mr. Rodney crawled, like Jean Valjean in the sewers of Paris, he heard upon every side the slow breathing of almost suffocated society. Here he recognised the familiar snort of the Lady Jane Clinch, famous for her luncheons, there the piping sigh of the old Countess of Sage, who was born on the day of the Battle of Waterloo, and talked of the Crimean War as a recent event. He heard the Baroness Clayfield-Moor shuffling her feet, according to her immemorial custom, and recognised, with a happy thrill of instant knowledge, the stifled cough of Mrs. Brainton Gumm, the Banana Queen, who had taken society by storm two seasons ago, and still kept her footing by paying it with persistent entertainments. A little further forward the familiar sneeze of the Duchess of Southborough broke upon his listening ear, and his bosom heaved with the exultant satisfaction of the hare with many friends. There was, indeed, no atmosphere in which Mr. Rodney felt more thoroughly like a fish in water than the atmosphere of Mr. Pettingham's delightful gatherings. The utter darkness in which they invariably took place lent

them a peculiar charm, obliging the acute society man to rely on an unusual sense for the discovery of those known to him. The eye was rendered useless; the guns of vision were, for the moment, spiked. Success and comfort depended upon the senses of hearing and of touch. Never did Mr. Rodney feel more completely the rapture of the sleuth-hound than when he followed the trail of one attractive to him through the dense human jungle of the Unattached Club.

To-night, however, he was a little bit off-colour, owing to the agony of mind which he had been enduring for the last few days. In consequence, perhaps, of this fact, his feet forgot for an instant their ancient cunning, and when he heard the Duchess of Southborough sneeze a second time in his immediate vicinity he started, and trod heavily upon a neighbouring Marchioness. Of course he knew her. Directly she screamed he discovered an old and valued friend, and poured forth a complete apology into the blackness, an apology which was whisperingly accepted. But this painful misadventure slightly flurried him, and caused him to commit a solecism the memory of which haunted him to the last day of his life. For, after making his peace with the Marchioness, he inadvertently sat down in the Duchess of Southborough's lap, just as Mr. Ingerstall was vehemently hissing into her ears, "The only thing that makes Tangier possible is the fact that there is a French Consulate there. That cursed thing, British influence—" It was at this point that the Duchess suddenly began to struggle feebly, and to catch her breath beneath the unexpected imposition of Mr. Rodney. He got up immediately. Any gentleman would have done so, much more our friend from Mitching Dean. But the Duchess, partly from surprise since she had not heard anyone

approaching her in the darkness, partly from the physical collapse very naturally brought about in an elderly lady who is suddenly called upon to support a weight of some twelve stone or thereabouts, continued to gurgle in a very alarming manner. Mr. Pettingham, who, rod in hand, was in the very act of pointing to a small figure relieved in colours upon the sheet, and saying, "There you will perceive my excellent friend, the Prince, stepping into the first boat to go ashore," was brought up short in his informing discourse.

"I hope nothing is the matter? No one is taken ill?" he quacked anxiously.

The perspiration broke out in a cold cloud upon Mr. Rodney's face. He bent down to the darkness from which he had just risen, and murmured, with a pungent agony, and a disregard of grammar that did him credit:

"Duchess, it's only me! I do assure you it's only me, Mr. Rodney! Pray, pray forgive me! Oh, pray do recover! Be all right! Oh, Duchess, for our old friendship's sake, be all right, or they'll turn on the lights!"

This tragic appeal was not without its effect upon her Grace. She good-naturedly came to, and Mr. Rodney, fortunately discovering an unoccupied seat on her off-side, sat down and hastily went on apologizing, while Mr. Pettingham proceeded with his discourse.

"I cannot—I can never tell you how grieved and shocked I am," Mr. Rodney whispered.

"What is your weight?" whispered back the Duchess.

"My—I beg your pardon!"

"How much do you weigh? You are monstrously heavy for your size."

"I am very sorry. I am quite ashamed—only just twelve stone, I do assure you—I am really—"

"My dear man, never mind. If Mr. Pettingham will keep the room so dark we must all expect to be sat on. Where have you been all this long time? I have n't seen you anywhere for the last three days."

"I have been at Mitching Dean."

"What, at this time of year?"

"I have not been at all well."

"Gout? Carlsbad would do you more good than Mitching Dean."

"It was not the gout; it was more painful than that," Mr. Rodney hissed, with genuine emotion. "Is Mrs. Verulam here to-night?"

"Yes, in pale green—charming little creature!"

Mr. Rodney thrilled.

"Mr. Van Adam is with her," continued the Duchess. "They are about eighteen rows behind us, and Pearl is sitting with them."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. Mr. Van Adam has quite cheered her up, poor child; or else it is Dr. Spencer Hill's new spray treatment that she is trying. But I really am inclined to think it is Mr. Van Adam. He is a great success in London."

"Really!"

"Oh, a great success!" By the sound of her whisper Mr. Rodney knew that the Duchess had turned her head to the near side. "Is n't he, Mr. Ingerstall?"

"I really do n't know. I only know that he liked the mosaics—actually admired them!" snapped that gentleman, in the distance; "and yet he has lived in Paris. He has seen the—"

"How did Mrs. Verulam get to know him?" continued her Grace to the off-side.

The palpitations of jealousy seized Mr. Rodney.

"I have no idea," he whispered.

"Was she ever in Florida?"

"Oh, dear, no!"

"Of course people are talking—"

"Might I venture to request silence?" quacked the irritated voice of Mr. Pettingham, at this juncture. "It is almost impossible for me to bring my friend the Duke of Drigg's adventure in the Soko vividly before you if I do not have the kind assistance of your complete attention. Well, as I was saying, it was very evident to me that Fatimah was decidedly under the influence of haschish." He struck a bell. "Here you see Fatimah under the influence of haschish."

"These adventures of Drigg's are very uninteresting," continued the Duchess, resuming her conversation in a louder whisper. "People are talking, you know, Mr. Rodney."

"Talking—what about?"

"Oh, Mrs. Verulam and Mr. Van Adam. But I take a more charitable view. After all, she's twenty-eight."

"Oh, surely not more than twenty-seven?"

"English women always look more than their age," Mr. Ingerstall whispered violently. "It's an extraordinary thing! Now, a Parisian—"

"Twenty-eight, Mr. Rodney; and getting on towards twenty-nine. And he looks a mere boy. You have heard all about him? Did Bernard Roche ever tell you his age?"

"No, never!" said Mr. Rodney, suddenly registering a vow to write on the morrow to New York and find out a great deal about Huskinson, against whom he was rapidly conceiving a most deadly hatred.

"He seems very young to have got a divorce," her Grace whispered, reflectively. "However, in America

I suppose they begin earlier than we do over here. People develop more rapidly, I believe."

"Yes, Duchess; but about Mrs. Verulam and Mr. Van Adam. What are people saying?"

Mr. Rodney's note was hoarse.

"Oh, the usual thing. And certainly it is a little strange, his coming all the way from Florida to stay with her—alone in the house, too. A little injudicious, certainly. Old Martha Sage is terribly shocked about it. She declares it is the most extraordinary affair she has known since the Crimean War!"

Mr. Rodney turned pale in the darkness. On what a precipice was Mrs. Verulam walking. And James Bush, too! But Lady Sage and the Duchess knew nothing yet of him. The darkness became to Mr. Rodney like a spinning ball, in whose interior he violently revolved through space. He was recalled to himself by hearing the Duchess say:

"Are you going on to the panthers?"

"The panthers?"

"Of Sartorius, at Mrs. Vigors's in Brook Street?"

"Oh, yes, I believe I am, if there is time. Pettingham is a little lengthy to-night."

"Terribly!"

She listened for a moment.

"Dear! Fatimah is still evidently under the influence of haschish. This is endless!"

She agitated her enormous fan in the darkness. All around might now be heard a rustling as of wings. The Dowagers, half suffocated, were doing likewise. Mr. Pettingham sipped at a glass of water, and calmly continued:

"When the Duke said this to Fatimah, the Prince and I were convulsed. I got down off my donkey—"

"This is wonderfully interesting," Chloe murmured to Mrs. Verulam, eighteen rows back.

Mrs. Verulam, who was lost in a reverie, through which James Bush moved with all the dignity of her idea of Agag, started and replied:

"D' you think so? I think it appalling! Even the Holy Land must have been better than this. If he takes us into the interior, I shall faint."

"I shall now proceed to show you some views of the interior," continued Mr. Pettingham, with a quacking complacency. "First try to imagine yourselves in one of the filthy alleys of the Jewish quarter of Tetuan." He struck the bell again. "Here you see one of the filthy alleys faithfully reproduced."

"If only somebody would open a window," murmured Mrs. Verulam distractedly. "Oh, but I forgot; we are in the basement of the club, and there are none."

"Is it really true that the Princess of Galilee is here?"

"Yes, poor thing, in the front row. Oh, Chlo—oh, Mr. Van Adam, if you only knew how I long to be quietly away from all this, sitting in some sweet garden, with the quiet marshes stretching away all round me on every side, and—"

"Oh, not marshes; they are horrible! You should see the swamps in Florida!"

"An English marsh is quite, quite different. Mr. Bush has lived in one all his life at Bungay." She sank her voice on the last romantic word, and breathed a gentle sigh. "He will tell us of his life—of the true, best life—when he comes to Ribton Marches," she added softly. "For he has accepted my invitation in his own dear, characteristic manner. I meant to have told you. I got his letter—or, rather, his postcard—to-night, just before we were starting."

"What did it say?"

"'Comin'.—J. BUSH.'"

"Is n't that a little short—for an answer to you, I mean?"

"Yes, short and to the point. How much better than filling sheets and sheets of letter-paper with empty phrases and meaningless compliments."

"Yes?" said Chloe rather doubtfully, as she settled her shirt-front, and slightly pulled up her trousers to prevent them getting into "knees." And then her attention was claimed by the Lady Pearl, who murmured in her ear:

"How terrible must be the suffering of these poor Moorish infidels! It is impossible to escape from agony, mental and physical, in any part of the world."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Verulam suffered under a very delightful infliction of the darkness. At Mr. Pettingham's parties people very often heard themselves talked about, as the want of light rendered it impossible to see who was who and who was where. Therefore, the injudicious were constantly prone to allow their opinions to be known by those whom they most nearly concerned. While the Lady Pearl was pouring her very creditable heart-woes or secret consciousness of gouty tendency into the ears of the supposed Mr. Van Adam, a woman's voice broke upon Mrs. Verulam's unoccupied ears.

"Did you see them come in?" it whispered, apparently carrying on an already begun conversation.

"Yes," replied another murmuring female voice.

"Did you like her gown?"

"Pretty well. I am certain it must have come from Violette's."

"Oh, I thought she got all her gowns in Paris."

"My dear, she *says* so."

"She does her hair well."

"Yes. But I am not sure whether it suits her broadened out so very much over the temples. I thought it looked a little exaggerated, but I daresay the men like that."

"Men always admire her."

"Oh, men admire anybody! They have nothing else to do. Mrs. Verulam does as well as you or I, or anyone else."

"I hear Mr. Hyacinth Rodney is simply furious about this Mr. Van Adam. They say he has left town and gone away to Mitching Dean."

"Where everything comes from. I don't wonder. Mrs. Verulam seems to have taken leave of her senses. To have a man only just divorced—a mere boy, certainly, but so handsome—over from America to spend the season with her! It's the most extraordinary proceeding! I don't think people will stand it. She's taken Ribton Marches because he has never seen an Ascot. Lady Sage is trotting about everywhere expressing her private opinion of the matter."

"What is it?"

"Oh, too straightforward to quote here. But I fancy if Mrs. Verulam is n't very careful she will get to know what the cold shoulder is at last. One can't fly in the face of—oh, what's that?"

A crash in Mr. Pettingham's direction startled the suffocating titles. Providence had been kind, and, taking pity on their increasing breathlessness, had caused the hand of the slide-manager to slip at a critical moment. The interior of Morocco strewn the floor in fragments, and the adventures of "my excellent friends, Prince Carl of Schmelzig-Heinstein and the Duke of Drigg," were brought to an abrupt and merciful termi-

nation. A blaze of electric light revealed a panorama of hot faces, heaving shoulders, gleaming tiaras, and waving fans. Mr. Pettingham stepped down, with many apologies for the unfortunate accident, into the room, offered his arm to the Princess of Galilee, and escorted her towards the supper-room, quacking loudly as he went. Conversation burst forth as if a dam had been pierced. Dowagers rose up, groups formed and dispersed. The two words "Palestine soup" floated on the surface of every mind, and a general move was made in the direction taken by the host and the Princess.

In the midst of the confusion, Mrs. Verulam saw the tall and thin form of Mr. Rodney carefully—remembering the Marchioness—threading his way towards her through the throng. His eyes were fixed reproachfully upon her, and he had assumed the self-conscious air of a man recovering from a long and dangerous illness. The Duchess of Southborough followed, escorted by the shouting Mr. Ingerstall. Mrs. Verulam found herself overtaken by a shudder of boredom. She looked away, and saw the two women who had been discussing her so incautiously get up and exchange glances of dull and strangled horror on perceiving that she had been sitting so near to them. And, while she felt that she hated them, she almost loved their scandal, for it seemed to set the cage-door ajar. And she fancied that she could see the squirrel—no longer Tommy, but Daisy—cease from its everlasting scramble upon the revolving gilded bars, and turn bright eyes upon the door pushed ever so little outwards, and move to it, and put its nose—just outside. That was lovely! And since it was most certainly the young gentleman in the tweed suit, now in orthodox evening dress, who had accomplished this good beginning of a miracle, Mrs. Verulam turned

to him with a quick and expressive movement of gratitude and graciousness. More than one well-bred starrer noticed it, and the Verulam and Van Adam scandal marched another step onward, while Mr. Rodney began to look as if the poor, self-conscious man was rather relapsing into than recovering from his illness. However, he approached, trying not to glare at Chloe, who looked marvellously young and handsome in her man's costume, took Mrs. Verulam's hand, and said softly:

"I have just returned from Mitching Dean."

"Indeed! I did n't know you had been away until to-night."

"I felt that I must have rest—change—time to think and to recover."

"From what, Mr. Rodney?"

"From the blow; the blow dealt me by a cherished hand."

Mrs. Verulam tried not to look too obviously bored.

"I hope you are better?"

"That I have to find out; that I must know. It is a question to me whether I shall ever be better."

He glanced again at the radiant Huskinson, now in animated conversation with Lady Pearl and the Duchess, thought again of James Bush, and was nearly feeling himself the most unhappy of men. He could not hide from himself the horrible fact that Huskinson looked well in evening dress, and the man who looks well in evening dress looks well in anything. Mr. Rodney surveyed the slim form of the orange-grower, his curly black hair, his bright and merry dark eyes, noted his animated and youthful manner, perceived that he went to a first-rate tailor—Francis did know all about it!—and felt a sort of prostration stealing over him. He mentally went back upon his resolve to hold out the

right hand of fellowship to Huskinson by a present of melons from Mitching Dean. One does not heap melons upon an adversary. Human charity has its limits. Mr. Rodney, casting a pale and jaundiced glance upon the bright and successful youth so lightly bearing his recent trouble, resolved, and resolved with real firmness, that the beds of Mitching Dean should not be denuded of their mellow and tender-hued fruit. No, no!

Meanwhile, Chloe was in high feather. She had lost all fear of discovery, and gave herself ardently to the bosom of that wonderful thing, society, which received her with that strange and bizarre passion of receptive protection and coaxing ecstasy reserved for the millionaire. Only the millionaire fully knows the greedy love of the monster, its tenacious anxiety to please, its skipping and self-conscious lures, its readiness for self-humiliation, its grand and ample abandonments of dignity. Only the millionaire sees in perfection those fawning attitudes of the monster, supple and engaging, which no new-fledged puppy dog can ever surpass, or even emulate, when creeping with flattened ears about the feet of a worshipped master. Chloe knew at last the smiles of Duchesses as she could never have known them had she not slipped into an evening coat, pumps, silk socks, and "the newest thing in waistcoats." The lethargy of a forgetful footman had opened for her the very gates of heaven. She had the animal spirits to enter in with an intrepid gladness. At present she was cheering up the melancholies of the Lady Pearl, who blossomed into a sort of sepulchral hilarity beneath her warming rays. The Duchess of Southborough smiled upon the sunny transformation. But soon her Grace, business-like even in beatitude, remembered that there were even more important matters afoot than the gradual disper-

sion of a daughter's gout, and, advancing upon Mrs. Verulam, she exclaimed, in her friendly bass:

"And what about Ascot, Mrs. Verulam? Is it all settled? The Duke is enchanted at the idea of a week in the Bun Emperor's palace; for Ribton Marches is forbidden ground to everybody. Mr. Lite never has visitors, except to lunch to sign an advertisement. He thinks the sanctity of the home should not be intruded upon. Have you really got the house?"

"Mr. Rodney says 'really,'" Mrs. Verulam said, looking at him.

Mr. Rodney bowed towards his boots.

"Dear me! How delightful! A large party?"

"Very small."

Mrs. Verulam mentioned its items. Her Grace, although her magnificent jaw fell slightly at the name of Mr. Ingerstall, was pleased to say that it was cosy.

"And Mr. Van Adam will keep us all going," she added, flinging in Chloe's direction a weighty smile of approbation.

Mr. Rodney squirmed.

"But who is this Mr. Bush, dear Mrs. Verulam?" she continued. "Does one know his name?"

"He is a country friend; he lives in retirement in Bungay Marshes."

"Sounds a rather damp existence. I hope he will not give us all cold. Pearl, my darling, you may go in to supper now with Mr. Van Adam. Remember to drink nothing but lime-juice cordial. Mr. Van Adam, I trust you to see that my child does not touch champagne. With her tendency it would be fatal."

The Lady Pearl flushed with vexation. To have one's mental malady drenched with lime-juice—one's soul treated like the body of a North Pole explorer—is to

swallow a bitter pill. She looked at her large mother with a dawning defiance. Then she took Chloe's arm, and whispered loudly in her ear:

"I shall drink champagne to-night. I will not be treated like a"—she had nearly said "child," but, recollecting herself, substituted "gout-patient." The words, tremulous and tragic, seemed to come from the very depths of a nature profound as a well. Chloe received them with the smile that had enthralled Huskinson, and whispered back:

"I'll get you two glasses."

It was innocently said, but that it was strictly judicious cannot be admitted. Such tender treatment was surely calculated to stir too wildly a character like the Lady Pearl's. And, moreover, it led her into subterfuges, for, half an hour later, when the Duchess, Mrs. Verulam, Chloe, Mr. Rodney, Mr. Ingerstall, and others, were gathered in the hall of the Unattached Club, waiting for the carriages which were to take them all "on" to the panthers, she replied to her Grace's question, "You kept to lime-juice, Pearl darling?" "Oh, mamma, I drank two glasses," and her accompanying glance at Chloe was almost in the nature of a tiny wink.

CHAPTER VII

THE BUN EMPEROR AND EMPRESS AT HOME

As the rabbit, in moments of danger, has a passion for the little hole into which it darts with the speed of lightning, so, in moments both of safety and danger, has the properly-constituted Englishman a passion for "the home." Even the most middle-class owner of a tiny semi-detached "villa residence," looking out over a network of railway, is prepared to defend it and its clothes-line, and that mysterious barrel which always stands on end at its back door, with his heart's best blood. Now, this is very creditable. But even a very beautiful and noble instinct may be carried too far. And the Englishman's passion for the home was, in the Bun Emperor's case, carried very far indeed.

Mr. Lite was a remarkable man in many subtle ways. Of course, he had risen from the gutter. Everybody does that nowadays. There is nothing original in the feat. His gutter was an exceedingly small, and exceedingly dingy, pie-shop in Camberwell, the sort of miscellaneous pie-shop which exhibits to the street a terrace on which things of meat and things of jam, the saveloy and the marmalade puff, air themselves side by side in a fly-blown amity of meek endurance. And it was this fact which had eventually obtained for worthy Mrs. Lite, who had assisted in the shop, the sobriquet of "the raised pie," a title suitable to her changed social condition.

In the old days, Mr. Perry Lite had been devoured by a passion for the Camberwell home. He had worshipped the terrace on which the pies lethargically leaned. He had adored the stuffy back-parlour, divided from the shop by a half-glass door, on which a cracked bell tinkled. The man who had dared to invade the privacy of that parlour would have found himself face to face with a fury, inflexibly set on ejection. The small bedroom above stairs was, at that time, Mr. Lite's idea of heaven, and he considered the attic in which the servant—had there been one, which there was not—would have slept a fit receptacle for a goddess. In fact, Mr. Lite's heart sent out tendrils, which climbed, like creepers, all over the Camberwell pie-house. But in due time he had to cut the creepers down.

Either Mrs. Lite was unusually clever at making pies, buns, sweetmeats, and cakes, or Mr. Lite had extraordinary business capacity, or Fortune was determined that there should be a Bun Emperor in Britain, and that Mr. Lite looked the part better than anybody else. In any case, money came, and with it changes. The Camberwell residence was exchanged for Bayswater; Bayswater was given up in its turn for Oxford Street. Then followed Piccadilly, with branch establishments all over the place. And, finally, Mr. and Mrs. Lite found themselves settled in the palace near Ascot which was known far and wide to a wondering world as Ribton Marches. And it was in Ribton Marches that Mr. Lite allowed the old passion to develop into a disease. At Camberwell he had been very fond of the home. At Sunninghill he adored it with his whole heart and body, preferring it to Windsor Castle, and strong in a belief that her Most Gracious Majesty, who occasionally passed near his gates while on her afternoon carriage expeditions, sick-

ened with envy when her royal eyes beheld the cupolas which made the roof-tree of the palace bulbous in every imaginable direction. Ribton Marches had been built according to Mr. Lite's own ideas, which took the form of a huge erection combining many of the peculiar merits of the Leicester Square Alhambra and the Crystal Palace. Wherever you expected to find stone you came upon glass; wherever you anticipated glass you came upon stone. If you looked for a flat roof your eye met a cupola; if you glanced up in search of a cupola, you probably missed it and saw a flat roof. The palace continually "had" you. It was full of winter gardens, and in all these winter gardens there were talking parrots. The palace was crammed with echoes, and, as you explored it, under the careful and most suspicious supervision of Mr. Lite, its mighty walls seemed to breathe out to you from every side such mysterious expressions as "Hallelujah! Bow-wow-wow!" "Polly, go to bed!" and "Polly very drunk; naughty Polly!" the latter statement being usually succeeded by a loud noise as of the drawing of dozens of champagne corks. There were several libraries in the palace, and several boudoirs; but the boudoirs were on the ground-floor, and the libraries were upstairs. In the picture-gallery the Dutch-oven school was well represented, and in the purple drawing-room there was a new species of orchestrion, to the hullabaloo of which Mr. and Mrs. Lite were wont to fall gently asleep each evening after dinner. A remarkable feature of the palace was the large number of machines, constructed on the penny-in-the-slot principle, which stood about in the different apartments, prepared to yield to the influence of the inquiring copper an assortment of cigars, stamps, cigarettes, surprise packets, chocolate drops, Dutch dolls, perfume squirts,

luggage-labels, and other like necessities. Of these Mr. Lite was very proud: their mechanism, which no fellow was ever able to understand, was devised by him, and was different in important respects from that of the graceful erections which have been so artistically placed in many of the more beautiful parts of England. Whenever any guests came to lunch with him—he seldom had anyone to stay the night—he would always invite them to set his machines in motion, and the disappearing pennies went to assist in the founding of the Lite Home for Elderly Bun-makers who had got past their work.

In the centre of the palace was a large hall, baronial here and there, containing a staircase which had been conveyed, at a vast cost, from somewhere abroad, an oak ceiling, an organ, and other necessary furniture. At the first glance this hall looked rather more suitable for the accommodation of Handel festivals than for a simple home life. But the Bun Emperor and Empress, looking—as to size—like a couple of peas in the vast immensity of unutterable space, often took afternoon tea there in sweet domestic solitude, or sat there by the hour listening to the distant voices of the parrots resounding from the adjacent winter gardens. Other inhabitants of the palace were certain pugs—Dinah, Sam, Gog, and Magog—retained by Mrs. Lite to give an air of aristocracy to the establishment; various footmen, powdered and unpowdered; and a very large and scorbutic individual, by name Mr. Harrison, who enjoyed the title of “groom of the chambers,” and the advantage of doing nothing whatsoever from morning till night.

On a certain evening in June the Bun Emperor and Empress rose at about eight o'clock from their late dinner in the cedar-wood dining-parlour, decorated with the

heads of stags shot by nobody knows who, engravings of popular pictures, and china from different portions of the habitable globe, and proceeded to the purple drawing-room to listen to the cooling orchestration, whose tremendous strains so soothed their souls and stimulated their digestive processes. They went arm-in-arm, preceded by a footman, and followed by the pugs in waddling procession. The Bun Emperor was short, with exceedingly rounded contours, features resembling those of the first Napoleon, fierce, dark eyes, and the gait of a man who has won a great many battles. His Empress was also short and rounded, with gray hair elaborated into many little curls about her forehead, neat features of the nut-cracker type, and, as a general rule, a slightly fatuous expression of eager self-complacency. To-night, however, her face was decorated with the flames of temper, and she gained the purple drawing-room on rather tremulous feet.

Arrived there, she sharply withdrew her hand from the Emperor's fat arm, sat down in a brocaded chair, and turned upon the respectful flunkey who had shown the way.

"Frederick," she said, "turn on the orchestration."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And set it at 'They Never Do That to Me.'"

She darted a glance at the Emperor as she said the last words.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Frederick.

The pugs sat down. Frederick obeyed orders, and in a moment the big room was crammed with the beautiful and classical strains of the song already alluded to, given out by the expensive instrument with an unflinching power and a stentorian sweetness that must surely have compelled the most unmusical person to do hom-

age, if not to melody, at least to strength. Frederick made his exit, and the Bun Emperor collapsed in silence by his wife's side. He looked less violent than usual, and, indeed, the expression upon his face might almost have been called an expression of apprehension. The song ran on. The pugs declined from a sitting into a sidelong posture, and with four simultaneous sighs gave way to the charms of snoring, with open eyes. The Emperor's two thumbs began rapidly to revolve one over the other.

"Do n't do that, Perry," said the Empress; "it spoils the music."

The Emperor desisted, apparently very much to his wife's vexation, for she pursed her lips, screwed her brow, and arranged her curls with a trembling hand. "For they nev-arr do that *to* me!" shouted the orchestra for the dozenth time.

"D'you hear that, Perry?" said the Empress viciously.

The Emperor jerked an affirmative with his head.

"And d'you feel it?" pursued the Empress. "D'you feel it as you ought?"

"My dear!" said the Emperor. "My dear!"

"Oh, I daresay," said the Empress, flaunting her head passionately sideways. "I daresay. But what's the good of that? What's the good of affection, and 'my dear' this, and 'my dear' that, when it's done and can't be undone?"

"I can't go back upon my word, Henrietta."

"Then why give it? That's what I say. Why give it?" cried the Empress. "And all for a paltry bit of bun-praise that won't sell half a million of buns when all's said and done."

And she kicked Magog sharply in his third rib. The

latter sent forth a cry of anguish, but the Empress was in no way concerned; on the contrary, the utterance seemed to nerve her for fresh exertions.

"No, nor a quarter of a million," she continued. "Let it be in every paper in Christendom."

"I think you underrate Lady Sophia's influence, Henrietta," said the Emperor meekly; "I do indeed. She will have great weight in infant circles, I feel sure—very great weight, my dear. That 'they should be nourishing' will go home to the mothers, too. Oh, there can be no doubt at all about it, no doubt in the world."

"That 's what you think?"

"It is, my darling, it is indeed!"

"Well, and if she does sell half a million, or a million either, it ain't worth it. No, Perry, it ain't."

At this juncture the Empress was visibly affected. Her "ain't" was really tragic, not merely on account of the stress with which it was given out, but still more on account of its employment by the lady; for both the Emperor and Empress were, in calm moments, very particular in speech. They not merely refrained from dropping their h's and from putting them in wrongly, they went further than that. They dealt very tenderly and impressively with aspirates, sounding them in a marked and highly deliberate manner when they occurred, and even leaving them out when they did not occur, in a way that could scarcely escape the attention of the keen grammarian or finished orator. The Emperor was greatly moved by his wife's avoidance of the customary "is not." But he was a tenacious man, and still held to his point.

"If I had not secured Lady Sophia's bun-praise when I had the opportunity, my dear," he said, "it would have haunted me to the last day of my life. It would

have been going against the principles of a lifetime; them as have—those which have made us what we are, Henrietta. Go for the names—that has been my motto in the trade. Go for the names."

"Yes; go for the names, and go out of the home!" cried the Empress. "Oh, Perry, Perry!"

The orchestration drowned her wail, but the Emperor felt it, divined it, nevertheless. He was sincerely moved.

"Do n't, my dear, do n't!" he ejaculated.

"I will! I must!" said the Empress. "To leave the old home at our time of life! To be turned out into the streets! Oh! oh!"

This statement of the Empress contained at least two fallacies, which might almost be called thumping lies. For Ribton Marches was only about five years old, and the fishing cottage to which Mr. Rodney had persuaded the worthy couple presently to retire was backed by a pine wood and fronted by a charming little pond, generally called "the lake." However, the Emperor did not contradict his spouse. He only patted her gently on her heaving back, while his own features became contorted with agitation at the prospect conjured up by her pictorial remarks.

"And these Londoners, continued the Empress, very nearly qualifying them with the contemptuous epithet "ere,"—"these Londoners! Oh, what may they not do to the home! What may they not do! I can't bear it! No, I can't!"

The Emperor's face assumed an expression such as may well have been observed upon Napoleon's immediately before the battle of Waterloo.

"Do to the home!" he said, striking one fat hand down upon his knee. "Let them try it on! Mr. Harrison has his orders."

The Empress looked up.

"What d' you mean, Perry?" she asked.

"What I say, Henrietta. Mr. Harrison has his orders."

Had the Emperor been speaking of certain secret commands laid by him upon a professional assassin his voice could not have been more fiercely sinister. The blood of the Empress almost ran cold.

"No, they never do that to me!" bellowed the orchestra.

"What orders, Perry? Orders to do what?"

"Ah!" said the Emperor, wagging his massive head passionately from one side to the other, while his eyes stared as if in contemplation of some terrible picture. "Let them try it on! Let them only try it, and they will repent it, Henrietta, to the last day of their natural lives!"

"Perry!" said the Empress, impressively, "what are you going for to do?"

"My duty to you and to the home."

"What! then the Londoners ain't coming?"

"Are not, my dear," said the Emperor, in courtly correction. "Yes, come they must, for I've given my word to the fiddle-faced feller. But, as I say, Mr. Harrison has his orders to keep his eye on them, day in, day out, morning, noon, and night."

"Night, Perry!" ejaculated the Empress. "What—the ladies?"

"Only till they retire, Henrietta, of course. If they damage the bedrooms they shall answer for it though!"

The Emperor delivered the last sentence with the sudden rapidity and power of a thunderclap. The Empress, who was now beginning to take a back seat, looked admiringly at her lord.

"Ah, Perry, what a man you are!" she murmured.

"They shall find out what sort of a man I am, if they try on any of their tricks here," said the Emperor. "If so much as a bit of wood 's chipped off, or so much as a parrot's missing, they 'll regret it—to their lives' end, they will!"

But now, with the inconsistency of woman, the Empress returned to her former complaining.

"Yes, I daresay," she said, in a whining voice; "but having it out of them in the end won't make up to us for all we have to go through. Think of it, Perry! You and me not able to be in the home, not able to sit at tea in the hall, not able to hear that"—she waved her plump hand sorrowfully at the orchestration—"of an evening! Oh, Perry, think of the silence—think of the silence!"

And here the Empress wept as women weep at the silence of the grave. The Emperor looked at the orchestration.

"We might take it with us, perhaps," he said musingly. "It would be a comfort to us, Henrietta, that can't be denied."

"It 's too big for the cottage," wept the Empress. "No, it must be left for the Londoners to hear; they 'll listen to 'em, Perry—to all our tunes. They 'll hear 'em sitting where we sit now—'What 's the Odds as Long as We 're Young?' and 'I Did n't Go for to Cheese my Pal,' and 'My Old Dutch,' and all the rest of 'em! And we shall be sitting, you and me, and nothing but silence for us to hear!"

The poor lady became epic. She beat her hands in her emblazoned lap, and her features seemed to disappear behind her expression as the features in an agonized face sometimes do.

"It's only for six days," faltered the Emperor, almost overwhelmed by the realization of what was before them.

"It'll seem six years—it'll seem a lifetime! And the size of the cottage, too! Why, it was only made to hold a fisherman!"

This argument was so unanswerable that the Emperor could only say:

"My dear, the house in Camberwell was small."

"And so was we when we lived there," retorted the Empress. "But we're a bit bigger now, I hope."

Who could stand up against such merciless logic? Not the Emperor, certainly. He began to feel as if they would have to spend their week in the fishing cottage crouching upon all-fours, in attitudes formed to attract the cramp. And meanwhile that pernicious race, "the Londoners," as the Empress always called them, in the voice of one alluding to the Hairy Ainu, or any other peculiarly savage tribe—the Londoners would be couching in the partially baronial hall, wandering through the vistas of boudoirs, reading in the libraries, listening to the light conversation of the parrots in the winter gardens, dining among the stags' heads in the cedar-wood parlour, possibly even dancing, or dicing, or following some other cannibal custom in the purple drawing-room. All these ideas, thronging upon him in a grisly crowd, so weighed upon the Emperor's spirit that he let his head drop on his breast, and allowed to escape from him this awful sentence of self-condemnation:

"I do believe I've been a fool!"

"You never spoke a truer word, Perry," rejoined the pitiless Empress. "And if I'd been at the Crystal Palace that night things would have been different. All I say is, do n't let that Mr. Rodney come near me, or I

may forget as I'm a lady, and let him feel on his face what I think of him."

"He over-persuaded me. He said Lady Sophia's word would bring in every mother in the kingdom."

"May it prove so," said the Empress, with biting sarcasm—"may it prove so, Perry! Do they bring their own linen?" she added sharply, "or do they sleep between our very sheets?"

"I'm afraid, my love, that we have to provide everything, excepting food. They pay extra for that—and drink."

The Empress lay back in a suffering position, as one who thinks of a strange and unknown tribe sleeping between her private sheets, and resting their dreadful heads upon her gently-nurtured pillow-slips. This announcement of the Emperor's seemed to be the last straw. She struggled no more; she resorted no longer to the weapons of argumentative brilliancy, cunning sarcasm, fiery logic, or tender pathos. She simply lay back and endured the devastating blows of Fate, as prepared for her by the husband to whom she naturally looked for tenderness and protection. And the Emperor, gazing furtively upon his consort, was wrung to the very heart. And all the time the orchestrion, as if in a mood of diabolic raillery, thundered out persistently "They Never Do That to Me!" The noise of the refrain got upon the Emperor's nerves. It seemed to chide him for a base deed. For had he not done the wrong thing by the Empress in striking his fearful bargain among the glittering steel knives with Mr. Rodney? Surely, surely, yes. But we do not like to have our faults brought home to us by a machine. The Emperor suddenly stamped his foot furiously upon the floor. This motion rang an electric bell let in to the carpet beside

his arm-chair. The powdered Frederick instantly appeared.

"Stop it!" cried the Emperor, in a fearful voice—"stop it!"

"Sir?"

"Stop that tune!"

Frederick induced the instrument to be quiet.

"And now," said the Emperor, throwing a compassionate and ashamed glance upon his wife—"now set it at—let's see"—he paused, in deep thought—"at the 'Dear Old Home.'"

Frederick obeying, the purple drawing-room was quickly pervaded by a strain so soft and heartrending that it might have melted an actor-manager to modesty, or persuaded a tigress to be tame. It had its effect even upon the Empress. She started, glanced around her with agitation as the melody smote—or rather glided—upon the porches of her ears, composed herself to inflexibility, started again, regarded the orchestrion with an air of distracted inquiry, turned to the Emperor, and finally, with a wild and poignant cry of "Oh, Perry, Perry, that it should come to this!" fell upon his breast, and bedewed his frilled shirt-front with wifely tears.

There are scenes that must not be described, circumstances that must not be depicted, situations that must not be intruded upon. One of the chief of these is surely an Emperor and Empress in hysterics. Let the veil close. Let privacy immerse the prostrated couple.

Yet we must meet them again in circumstances perhaps even more tragic. We must follow them through ways foggy with misfortune.

The Sunday immediately preceding the Monday of Ascot week was a black-letter day indeed for Mr. and Mrs. Lite. No potentates on the eve of being thrust out

from their kingdom ever suffered under a sense of greater indignity than did they as they saw their boxes being packed by valet and maid for departure, and wandered through the palace, taking a last farewell of the many objects that they loved so dearly. Mrs. Lite was become entirely lachrymose under the weight of unmerited misfortune, but her husband could, in almost all circumstances, rely with certainty upon the support of his naturally violent temper, and on this, as on many other less terrible occasions, it buoyed him up, and prevented him from sinking into a condition of unmanly despondency. Instead of being simply sad, he was also furious, and although depression unutterable attacked his bleeding heart as the hour drew near when he must leave the home, the passionate antagonism which he increasingly felt against "the Londoners" kept him from breaking down, and even assisted his habitual vitality till it burnt with the fierceness of a flame fed by petroleum. Especially hot was his wrath against poor, innocent Mr. Rodney, the unsuspecting cause of all this trouble. And one circumstance which increased the Bun Emperor's anger against the gentle owner of Mitching Dean was that Lady Sophia Tree's bun-praise, although it had been duly advertised in almost every paper in the kingdom, had not, as yet, occasioned any very unusual rush of infants upon the provender by the sale of which the Emperor and Empress lived. The sale had kept up, had even slightly increased, but that was all that could be said. Therefore, the Emperor's troubled waters were not mingled with a sufficient quantity of oil to quiet them. And on this fatal Sunday his passion mounted to a climax. The veins of his ample forehead were already swelled at breakfast—in winter garden number one. His cheeks were flushed at lunch-

time, and, as the afternoon drew on, he seemed perpetually on the verge of an ebullition of ungovernable fury. His large, gipsy-like eyes stared about him at all the familiar objects which he had collected in the home, objects hitherto only beheld by the very few persons—aristocratic bun-praisers and others—whom the Emperor honoured with his personal friendship. He held, in one fat hand, and frequently referred to, a list, forwarded according to agreement, by Mr. Rodney, of the members of the vile tribe who on the morrow were to take possession of his beautiful palace. The list was as follows:

| | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Mrs. Verulam. | Mr. Van Adam. |
| The Duchess of Southborough. | Mr. Hyacinth Rodney. |
| The Lady Pearl McAndrew. | The Duke of Southborough. |
| Hon. Miss Bindler. | Mr. Ingerstall. |
| Lady Drake. | Mr. James Bush. |

Over and over again did the Emperor con this list, and endeavour to conjure up an idea of what manner of women and men these unknown strangers might be. Over and over again did he read the names aloud to the Empress with a hard and guttural intonation. The only members of the tribe personally known to him were the Duke and Duchess of Southborough and Mr. Rodney. The latter he now loathed with all his soul. The two former he respected as thoroughly useful and efficient bun-praisers. What of the others? What of Mrs. Verulam, the Lady Pearl, Miss Bindler? What of Mr. Van Adam, Mr. Ingerstall, and Mr. James Bush? Names are sometimes suggestive, and call up pictures before the eyes of the imaginative. The Bun Emperor became imaginative under the combined influences of sorrow and temper, and, summoning the Empress to him in the hall built for the accommodation of Handel festivals, he proceeded to go through a performance that

was somewhat like a public school "call-over," without any answers from the boys.

"Sit down, Henrietta," he said, in a loud and quivering voice.

The Empress sat on a chair just under the great organ, and in the shadow of the enormous staircase. The Emperor remained standing, as if at a desk.

"Mrs. Verulam!" he cried, and looked from his list to the Empress, consulting furiously her intuitions.

The Empress shook her curly head.

"You don't like it, Henrietta?" said the Emperor anxiously.

"It's a silly-sounding name," said the Empress.

"It is, my dear. She's the one that pays the rent."

The Empress pursed her lips, and two tears trickled slowly over her rounded cheeks.

"That don't make her name any less silly-sounding," she gulped. "Oh, to think—"

"Mr. Van Adam!" cried the Emperor hastily, consulting the list again.

This time he did not ask the Empress for her opinion, but gave his own.

"I call that a low name," he said. "Bible names I never could abide since I was done by Ezekiel. You remember how I was done by Ezekiel over the pork pies?" The Empress nodded miserably. "Never trust a man with a Bible name," continued the Emperor impressively. "If you do, he'll round on you. Ezekiel, Adam, Hezekiah—they're all alike, as downy as they're made. Give a child a Bible name, and he'll grow up a hypocrite. The Duchess of Southborough!"

"She's better."

"Yes; her Grace does know a good bun," rejoined the Emperor. "'Your buns are exquisite'—you remem-

ber, Henrietta? That bit of bun-praise did us more good than ever that Lady Sophia's will, I'll lay. Hon. Miss Bindler?"

No response from the Empress. No comment from the Emperor.

"Lady Drake!"

Ditto.

"Mr. Hyacinth Rodney! Fiddle-faced beast! Mr. Ingerstall! What d' you think of him, my dear?"

"Not much," said the Empress. "Not much, Perry. He sounds to me like one of those nasty little fellers that go worming themselves about in places where they've no business."

"He'd better let Mr. Harrison catch him worming himself about when he's here!" cried the Emperor, with a sudden explosion of passion. "There shall be no worming here, Henrietta, if I have to go against my word and turn them all out neck and crop into the street."

In moments of emotion the imperial minds instinctively returned to early Camberwell days, and fell into the dear old Cockney habit of supposing that on making an exit from any building whatsoever, the person so doing must immediately find himself in a street. As a matter of fact, Ribton Marches stood majestically in its own grounds of some sixty acres, or thereabouts.

"Mr. James Bush!" cried the Emperor, partially recovering self-control.

There was a long pause, during which the couple regarded each other with staring eyes, that seemed turned inward in vehement self-examination. It appeared as if this name, the last on the list, carried with it a strange luggage of perplexity and confusion.

"Bush," the Emperor said at length—"James Bush. Well, Henrietta?"

"I don't know what to think of it," said the Empress. "I don't like it, Perry; I can't say I do. It's not a name I should have ever cared to marry, even when I was a foolish thing, before I took up with you and the pie-shop. No, it's not a name to marry."

The Emperor seemed greatly struck with these illuminative remarks. Yet he passed over the matrimonial demerits of Mr. Bush's name, and, with that power of coming straight to the point so characteristic of great minds, said:

"Is it a name to have in the home, Henrietta? That's the thing for us. Is it a name to have sleeping in our beds, eating off our linen, and listening to the instrument of an evening?"

The Empress wagged her head morosely in reply.

"Ah!" she said, "is it?"

"I have my doubts," the Emperor continued. "Shall we ask Mr. Harrison, my dear? We can always rely on him. He is a man that has seen the world, and can judge of a name at a first hearing."

"We might do worse," responded the Empress, lachrymously.

The Emperor pommelled the bell.

"Request Mr. Harrison to step this way," he said firmly to the footman.

In about five minutes the groom of the chambers appeared within the precincts of the hall. Mr. Harrison was remarkably well grown, and of a certain age. His hair had left him in his youth, but he retained a very red complexion, a heavy manner, and a habit of throwing out his feet, like a horse, on either side of him as he went along, which he seldom did, since he was peculiarly addicted to repose. Apparently he had been disturbed while in the active enjoyment of this peculiarity, for he

entered the presence with half-open eyes, a somewhat tousled and distressed whisker, and one side of his face an entirely different colour from the other. Where ordinary menials have their "day out," Mr. Harrison had his day in bed. This day was the Sabbath; and it must be confessed that he looked ill-pleased at the tour which he had been so unexpectedly obliged to take.

"Mr. Harrison," the Emperor said, casting on the groom of the chambers a searching glance, "I believe you are a man of the world."

"I am, sir," said Mr. Harrison, half allowing and half suppressing a yawn, a circumstance which made his countenance suddenly full of contradictory expressions.

"You can judge of a name at a first hearing, Mr. Harrison, I presume?" said the Emperor.

"Sir?" said Mr. Harrison, still under the influence of slumber.

"You can tell what you think about a name the first time you hear it, I say?" rejoined the Emperor, raising his voice.

"Oh, certainly, sir!" said Mr. Harrison, arranging the whisker which had been next the bolster with an unerring hand—"oh, most certainly!"

"Very well, then. Now, Mr. Harrison, give me your attention, if you please. I have here"—the Emperor pointed to Mr. Rodney's list—"the name James Bush." The Emperor paused, and Mr. Harrison tried to emerge from his last dream. "James Bush," repeated the Emperor.

"Indeed, sir!" said Mr. Harrison, feeling like a novice entangled in some complicated game—"indeed!"

"Well, Mr. Harrison?" said the Emperor, with growing emphasis—"well?"

The groom of the chambers felt that a statement of

some kind about something was undoubtedly required of him; he made a violent effort to summon his mind, and, partially succeeding, was able presently to exclaim with a good deal of determination:

"Not at all, sir—oh, dear, no; not at all—by no means!"

This seemed to him a remark that was adroit, and one that covered a considerable number of interrogative possibilities. Unfortunately, however, it did not appear to satisfy the requirements of the Emperor, who with some ferocity remarked:

"And what d'you mean by that, Mr. Harrison? Hah!"

The groom of the chambers was at length fully aroused by the very complex situation in which he now found himself, and, being really a man of considerable resource, he put two and two together with the swiftness of a Maxim gun.

"James Bush, sir," he said very emphatically; "oh, dear no, sir! James Bush—not at all—by no means—on no account whatever!"

He had not the smallest idea what he meant, or what he was being asked, and nobody could have been more surprised than himself at the effect which his vociferous jargon created. The Emperor turned to the Empress with the manner of a man who has received his quietus.

"There, Henrietta!" he said hoarsely—"there! You see what Mr. Harrison thinks of him! And that he should come unto the home! A feller like that—a feller that—" He broke off, and turned to the astounded groom of the chambers. "Mr. Harrison," he said, "we depend upon you in this affair entirely."

Mr. Harrison inclined himself in unutterable perplexity.

"Keep your eye upon him."

"Sir?"

"I say keep your eye especially upon that feller, James Bush."

"Certainly, sir."

"Do n't let him be too much for you, Mr. Harrison. He may have ways; he may be such a man as Ezekiel, there's no knowing. But I hold you responsible—Mrs. Lite and me, we hold you entirely responsible for everything that man may do in the home."

The groom of the chambers, having now gathered that a person in the name of James Bush was coming into Ribton Marches, doubtless as a member of the Londoners' tribe, and that he was to be specially watched by order of the Emperor, was comparatively at ease. He inclined himself again.

"I shall see to him, sir. Depend upon me."

"We do depend upon you, Mr. Harrison—we do, do n't we, Henrietta?"

"Mercy knows—we do!" sobbed the Empress.

"I shall not disappoint you, madam," said Mr. Harrison. "I shall know how to act."

"I believe that, Mr. Harrison," said the Emperor. "And I may add that if you should cop—if you should catch this feller, James Bush, at any of his games—you understand?"

"Certainly, sir."

"And if you should, as we expect, be one too many for him, we shall not forget it. You will have no reason to regret hereafter any steps that you may take. You understand?"

"Quite so, sir. I shall take them, sir, you may depend."

"Thank you, Mr. Harrison. You may go."

Mr. Harrison left the presence with dignity, and was soon back again in bed. As he laid his whisker once more on the bolster, he said to himself:

"I must take care to cop that there James Bush at some game or another, or where does the perquisite come in? Where is it?"

And murmuring thus he slept.

CHAPTER VIII

ARRIVAL OF THE LONDONERS AT RIBTON MARCHES

If the expulsion of our first parents from the Garden of Eden was a depressing business, what can be said of the final expulsion of the Emperor and Empress from Ribton Marches? It took place very early on the Monday morning. Originally they had been going overnight, but the Empress had so implored her husband to allow her to have one last Sunday night in the old home that he had not the necessary strength to refuse her, although, according to the strict letter of the agreement come to between him and Mr. Rodney, the palace belonged to Mrs. Verulam from the Monday to the Saturday inclusive.

At earliest dawn, then, behold the wretched couple "on the move," in terrible agitation having their last pet chattels placed reverently by menials in their trunks, in fearful confusion hastily gathering together any little things likely to be of solace to them in the period of excruciating exile that lies before them. The Emperor, now the moment of departure had actually arrived, was in a boiling passion. Steam might almost have been seen escaping from him as he gave directions to his servants, and laid a thousand last injunctions upon Mr. Harrison, who, rendered almost impotent by having had to get up from bed in that dead hour which precedes the rising of the sun, received them with a grievous courtesy

and the bending knees that so plainly betoken the deepest dejection of the human soul.

"Mr. Harrison!" shouted the Emperor.

"Sir!" replied that wretched functionary.

"Remember they are not to feed the parrots. On no account are they to tamper with Mrs. Lite's favourites."

"Certainly not, sir."

"If you see any symptom of a desire to do anything of that kind, you are to check it, Mr. Harrison."

"If I see any symptom of a desire to tamper with any of the parrots, I am to check it—yes, sir."

"If a single parrot goes wrong, Mrs. Lite will hold you responsible, Mr. Harrison. You understand that?"

Mr. Harrison bowed feebly, and thought of his empty bed.

"The pugs we shall take with us, Mr. Harrison."

"The pugs you will take—"

"Do n't echo me, Mr. Harrison—do n't echo me; I will not allow myself to be echoed."

"Certainly not, sir. Oh, no, by no means."

The Emperor stared furiously around him, fearful lest he might leave any necessary behind. His eyes fell upon a large field-glass in a case, which reclined upon a neighbouring bureau.

"Pack that glass!" he cried to his valet, in a voice of thunder.

The valet packed it with trembling rapidity. The Emperor turned again to the groom of the chambers.

"Through that glass I shall be able to command a considerable portion of the grounds," he exclaimed. "If I see anything going on there of which I disapprove, I shall summon you by the telephone, Mr. Harrison. You will hold yourself in readiness to fly to me at any moment of the day or night."

Mr. Harrison found himself feebly wondering which known bird he should be likely most nearly to resemble when he winged his way, as described by the Emperor, from the palace to the fishing cottage.

"I shall do so, sir," he said.

"Each morning," continued the Emperor, with blazing eyes and gathering excitement, "you will be round by eight o'clock with the report which you will have drawn up overnight, as arranged by me."

"By eight, sir?" cried Mr. Harrison, his voice vibrating with a music that was almost piercing.

"Well, seven, if you prefer it. I shall be up—I shall be ready."

"Oh, eight will suit me, sir, very well; I shall be round by eight."

"Be careful to omit nothing from that report. Make it ample; for I shall have damages out of these people—heavy damages—if they dare to exceed in any way, or to behave in any unseemly manner. You have your own ideas of what is unseemly, Mr. Harrison?"

"Oh, decidedly so, sir."

"Then I shall hold you responsible."

Mr. Harrison's knees began visibly to tremble, doubtless under the weight of responsibility that rested, like the globe, upon his slightly-rounded shoulders. He said nothing, only bowed once again, badly, as if the mechanism was getting out of order.

The dawn was now beginning to grow bright in the eastern sky above the fir-trees and the pines. The Emperor observed it through the lattice-pane, and knew that the hour was at hand. He called to the Empress:

"Henrietta!"

"Perry!" replied a broken voice, which might, indeed, almost be described as wet with tears.

"Henrietta, my dear, are you—are you nearly ready?"

"Oh, Perry, is it time? Oh, to think that—"

The Empress appeared in the aperture of the door fully dressed for eviction, wearing a large black bonnet, and carrying in one hand a small, but bulging bag. Her face was disfigured, even corrugated, with emotion.

"Is it time? Oh, is it really, really time?" she wailed.

The Emperor was greatly affected. He turned away for a moment and gazed towards the sunrise. Then he said: "Mr. Harrison!"

"Sir!"

"Is it time? Have you the paper?"

The groom of the chambers extracted a crested sheet from his left-hand pocket.

"Read it out," said the Emperor hoarsely.

Mr. Harrison read as follows:

"Arrivals, Monday, June the —: At 12:30, Mrs. Verulam, Mr. Rodney, and Mr. Van Adam, with Mrs. Marriner, maid, and one valet."

A loud sob from the Empress.

"At 3:15, Mr. James Bush."

"Go on, Mr. Harrison—go on."

"At between four and five, the Duke and Duchess of Southborough, the Lady Pearl McAndrew, Lady Drake, Miss Bindler, Mr. Ingerstall, with four maids and one valet."

Mr. Harrison paused, and the Emperor, looking with terrible inquiry at the Empress, repeated:

"Four maids and one valet."

"Oh, what may they not do—what may they not do, Perry?" wailed his consort, feebly.

The Emperor bit his lips to prevent himself from breaking down.

"Mr. Harrison!" he said.

"Sir!"

"Mr. Harrison, I warn you—I give you warning—"

"Give me warning, sir! Am I to go, sir?"

The groom of the chambers was so much overwhelmed that he suddenly sat down in the presence on a small occasional chair—one of those chairs which are seldom equal to the occasion. His agitation and surprise perhaps rendering him heavier than usual, the chair was unable to withstand the full bulk of his fourteen stone of horror. It gave way, and Mr. Harrison attained the floor with a noise like a drum-tap. He remained in a seated posture, gazing at the Emperor with eyes that looked sightless, although they were very wide open indeed. The Emperor and Empress backed from this vision with the rapidity of two crabs.

"Oh, that it should come to this!" cried the latter, putting the mind of the groom of the chambers into words.

"Mr. Harrison!" cried the Emperor, recovering himself near the door, "get up! get up from the floor, sir!"

But that gentleman was beyond movement, and was indeed, at that moment, vaguely considering whether he did not owe it to himself to be taken with a paralytic seizure. The Emperor, observing his meditative but complete prostration, condescended to approach him and to lend him a hand.

"Come, come, Mr. Harrison! Rise, I beg. Be a man, Mr. Harrison! Come, come! There, there! Lean against the wall. A glass of water, my dear!"
(To the Empress.)

The Empress ran, bearing a tooth-glass brimful.

"There, there, Mr. Harrison! You're spilling it! That's right! You mistook my meaning."

"Sir?"

"I meant that I give you warning that we, Mrs. Lite and me, will hold you responsible for the maids and the valets."

Relief ran over the recovering groom of the chambers in a complete flood.

"Oh, certainly, sir! I beg pardon! Oh, by no—by all means!"

The sun was beginning to pour in. The Emperor turned and offered his arm to the Empress. She shrank away with a whimper.

"My darling—my love—be firm! Remember, Henrietta, we are not alone."

He drew her trembling arm through his, and patted it violently with one fat hand.

"It must be done," he said, in a heroic voice. "I've give my word. It must be done."

They moved in procession from the private apartments, followed by Mr. Harrison, who threw his feet out on either side as he went, with a noble attempt after his habitual dignity. The household, by order of the Emperor, were grouped in the hall in front of the organ. It has not been recorded whether the women were weeping, but no doubt they were. The Emperor and Empress paused at the foot of the grand staircase in a baronial portion of the hall. The Emperor cleared his throat loudly not once nor twice. Between the clearings a pin was heard to drop, so intense was the silence. The third housemaid stooped to pick it up, and keeps it still as a memento of the occasion. Then the Emperor spoke in a sad, and at the same time very angry, manner.

"The time has come," he said, "when we must leave you; when me and Mrs. Lite must go."

There was a subdued murmur of regret from the crowd.

"We go," continued the Emperor, "with breaking hearts."

"We do! we do!" from the Empress.

More murmurs.

"But we feel that—that—we feel, I may say, that those we leave behind us in the home will not desert their master and missus; that they will do their duty by us, as we have done ours by them."

"True, true! Oh, indeed!" deep-mouthed from Mr. Harrison.

"Thank you, Mr. Harrison. We, me and Mrs. Lite, shall not forget that."

An inclination from the groom of the chambers.

"Others," proceeded the Emperor, in a loud and aspen-like voice, "others will come after us. Others will take our places. So it must ever be—bear up, Henrietta, my love, bear up!—so, I say, it must be. Things is—are like that in this world. Never a one can deny it. Do your duty by them!"

"No, no, Perry! Oh, no, no!" from the now sodden Empress.

"Hush, my dear! Do your duty one and all in those places into which they have been pleased to call you." Here the Emperor gingerly approached the wording of the catechism. "Do it, I say, but don't be put upon."

Loud murmurs of assent, more especially from those engaged in the kitchen department of the establishment.

"Do n't be put upon. Do n't be slaves."

"Hear, hear!" from Mr. Harrison.

"And"—here the Emperor obviously faltered—"do n't go for to forget the—old faces. Mr. Harri-

son—" His voice suddenly burst out in a trumpet-note of forcible resolution.

"Sir!"

"Is the pony-shay at the door?"

"It is, sir! Oh, most decidedly!"

The massive portals were flung open, and outside in the gay summer sunlight there appeared a basket-chaise drawn by a fat white pony, and led by a little groom. The four pugs stood round it barking vociferously. The Emperor threw one last distracted glance around, then shut his eyes, took hold of the Empress, and, pioneered by Mr. Harrison, moved slowly forward. The Empress, as one in a ghastly dream, accompanied him. In a moment she would have been placed in the chaise and driven from the dreadful scene, calm, blank, practically unconscious of her doom. But this was not to be. Fate willed it otherwise. Seized by a sudden, and it must be confessed, a very noble impulse, the powdered Frederick had run like a lamplighter to the purple drawing-room. The orchestrion stood before him. He leaped upon it as the wild beast leaps upon its prey. He caught at it. An instant! Then there was the sound of a click, and suddenly the wild and thrilling uproar of Tosti's "Good-bye!" poured violently through the reverberating palace.

The Empress heard it. She paused. She trembled. She opened her mouth. Something within her brain seemed to go snap. She shrieked aloud. The Emperor saw what was coming.

"Mr. Harrison!" he shouted.

"Sir!"

"Help me with Mrs. Lite! Get hold of her, Mr. Harrison, get hold of her!"

Mr. Harrison got hold of her, and, yelling, kicking, laughing, crying, and throwing her rounded limbs furi-

ously abroad, the Empress was carried down the steps, placed in the "shay," and rapidly driven off. Then Mr. Harrison returned into the hall.

"Prepare for the Londoners!" he said sternly to the household, and hurried instantly off to bed.

* * * * *

Soon after the big clock over the Ribton Marches stables had boomed out the half-hour after twelve, a carriage drove rapidly up to the palace, followed by a second, and succeeded by a private omnibus covered with luggage. The tribe were arriving. In the first carriage sat Mrs. Verulam, pale, but full of an animation that approached excitement; Chloe, clad in a delicious suit of tweed, with perfectly-falling trousers, the newest thing in collars, a red tie, and a straw hat; and Mr. Rodney playing cicerone and looking mightily serious. Why will presently be revealed. In the second carriage was placed the faithful Marriner, amid a cloud of wraps, dressing-cases, hat-boxes, parasols, and jewel-caskets. In the omnibus sat Mr. Rodney's valet, a pale gentleman with an undersized manner, the features of a rat, and very thin legs. Thus the vanguard approached. Chloe was apparently in fine spirits. She was talking incessantly, showing white teeth, and gazing about her with black eyes that sparkled with animation.

"Oh, is this really Ascot?" she cried. "Where is the course?"

"My dear Van Adam!" gently corrected Mr. Rodney; "the course is at some distance. This is Sunning-hill."

"What a number of cupolas!" said Mrs. Verulam. "And what an enormous house! We shall be lost in it!"

"I assure you it is quite cosy inside," said Mr. Rod-

ney, who considered the last remark as a sort of reflection upon him for engaging the house for the week. "The Lites consider it most home-like, I assure you; and they are very particular. Here is the entrance."

The gravel flew up beneath the hoofs of the high-stepping horses. The front door of the home opened wide, and discovered two footmen, behind and between whom were visible the large body and red face of Mr. Harrison, his features being decorated with an expression which it would be tame indeed to call one of suspicion. Imagine a London policeman who observes a ragged ruffian stealing out of the Tower of London with his hands full of the Crown jewels, and you may form some slight notion of the groom of the chambers' demeanour and facial attitudes on the entry of the Londoners into the hall of Ribton Marches. He had evidently been sleeping to some purpose, for he was now preternaturally wide awake, and not a person descended from the carriages, not a thing was removed therefrom, without having to run the gauntlet of his piercing and most extraordinary observation.

"What a very remarkable-looking man," Mrs. Verulam remarked to Mr. Rodney, as she removed her dust-wrap and walked towards the purple drawing-room. "He seems anxious. Is he ill?"

"Oh, no; I think not. I fancy he superintends the servants," said Mr. Rodney.

"Or us," said Chloe, flicking the dust off her patent-leather boots in a way that was hardly Englishmanly. "He appears to me like a detective who has n't mastered the first principle of his profession."

"And may I ask what that is?" blandly inquired Mr. Rodney.

"Certainly, old chap—not to look like one. See?"

Mr. Rodney did see, and secretly writhed. When he was called "old chap" he felt much as the maiden lady did when Mr. Pickwick appeared from the four-post bed, and recently Huskinson's familiarities had tried him deeply.

"What a very purple room!" said Mrs. Verulam, glancing round. "What is that thing over there—not a sideboard, nor a bureau, nor a writing-table?"

"That, madam," bayed a sudden voice, "is the instrument. Mr. and Mrs. Lite are very partial to it, but do not allow it to be employed during their absence."

Mr. Harrison was the speaker. Mr. Rodney was outraged by his intrusion into the conversation.

"Thank you," he said. "Kindly leave us."

Mr. Harrison hesitated visibly, but Mr. Rodney meant to be obeyed, so the groom of the chambers very deliberately decamped, casting his feet abroad after his manner.

"What a most extraordinary person!" said Mrs. Verulam.

"Oh, I daresay Mr. Lite has made a friend of him," said Mr. Rodney hastily. "These *nouveaux riches* do strange things."

"Hallelujah, bow-wow-wow!" murmured a distant voice; to which another voice responded: "Polly dreadful drunk. What 's o'clock, Polly?" Then innumerable corks were drawn with apparently supernatural swiftness.

Mr. Rodney reddened.

"Pray, do n't be alarmed," he said to Mrs. Verulam, who was visibly startled.

"Is it the same man?" she said. "Why, he must be mad."

"No, no. They are only Mrs. Lite's parrots talking in one of the winter gardens. It must be nearly lunch time. Would you not like to see your rooms?"

"Perhaps it would be as well. I feel as if you were my kind host."

Mr. Rodney beamed with pride and pleasure.

"I hope some day—at Mitching Dean—from which, by the way, I have ventured to order up a supply of grapes for the week. The Mitching Dean grapes are remarkably fine. Here is Mrs. Marriner," as the faithful Marriner appeared, apparently hypnotized by the orchestrion; "she will conduct you. By the way," Mr. Rodney added, turning to Huskinson, "I trust you will allow my man Harry to valet you during the week, since you've not yet succeeded in finding a man to your liking. Harry is—"

"No, no, thank you. You're awfully good; but it's not necessary," replied Chloe, with some haste.

"Most efficient," calmly pursued Mr. Rodney, intent on benevolence to the man he heartily hated. "He shaves better than any—"

"Thank you, I always shave myself," said Chloe—"morning and evening."

"So often?" said Mr. Rodney, with a glance of surprise at the smooth face above the tweed coat.

"Once a month—once a week, I mean. Well, I'll go and have a wash"; and she scurried off, leaving Mr. Rodney alone in the purple drawing-room.

He sat down on a purple chair, placed his thin feet on a purple stool, and fell into deep meditation. Since we first met him, in early May, perplexity had almost continually attended him. Mr. Rodney's mainspring was propriety; touched up with the adjective "smart." He believed devoutly in conventionality and titles.

Respectability and pedigrees were necessities to him, and as yet he had never been without them. It is true that he could accept the "right sort of man—or woman," even if he were aware that their lives were not ordered entirely on Nonconformist principles. In fact, he knew a great many rascals of both sexes, but they were rascals who knew everybody and were known by everybody. The women were all received at Court; the men all belonged to the right clubs, and so, according to Mr. Rodney's code, they were eminently respectable. Mr. Rodney had no special objection to people who broke the Ten Commandments, but he had a very great and very deeply-seated horror of people who outraged society. And this was what Mrs. Verulam—whom he admired, after Mitching Dean, more than anything on earth—seemed bent upon doing.

As he sat in the purple drawing-room, with his eyes fixed moodily on the orchestrion, he reviewed the events of the last few weeks without gaining any comfort from them. Undoubtedly Mrs. Verulam had succeeded in making herself the talk of the town with the Van Adam. She never moved without the divorced orange-grower in her pocket. She had taken him to every party; she had continually been alone with him in her opera-box; she had supped with him at the Savoy and at Willis's; she had driven down with him to Ranelagh, and returned after the moon was up; she had been with him on the river, and even in it; for Chloe had caught a crab near Athens, and been rescued by the steam-launch of a Cabinet Minister. All London was talking of her strange indiscretions. All London was talking—would all London presently be acting? That was the horrid thought, the grisly idea, which turned Mr. Rodney cold on the purple brocade and set the

orchestration dancing in front of his eyes. Even his jealousy faded before the spectre of Mrs. Verulam abandoned by society; "out of it," a person reduced to "first nights" and supper parties in shady restaurants. To be obliged to depend on "first nights" for one's gaiety was, to Mr. Rodney, much the same thing as having to keep house in the valley of dry bones. It was immolation. It was more: it was interment. He heard the earth pattering upon Mrs. Verulam's coffin. And the terrible thing was that some evil spirit seemed to have entered into Mrs. Verulam, a spirit that rejoiced in this threatening of disaster. She was, with her own hands, cutting through the cables that moored her to all that makes life worth living. And for an American! A man mixed up with oranges, the commonest of all fruits, the yellow thing that may be seen on the breakfast-tables of the lower middle classes, the abomination that is sucked in pits, whose pips are flung in showers from a thousand galleries a night! Mr. Rodney turned almost faint at the thought. If this Van Adam had even cultivated nectarines, or made his money in medlars. But no. It might have been nuts, certainly. But even this reflection brought little solace. Mr. Rodney had long since written to his old and valued friend, Lord Bernard Roche, asking a thousand discreet questions about "poor dear old Huskinson." But he had received no reply, no satisfaction to his very natural curiosity about the man so suddenly plunged into the very heart of his heart's life. And though this grave matter so afflicted Mr. Rodney, there was something further to perplex him.

There was James Bush. He was still, in a measure, shrouded in mystery. Yet Mr. Rodney had sometimes felt his influence upon Mrs. Verulam as one feels a thing

in the dark. Since that afternoon when Mr. Rodney practically had a fit on hearing of her intention to abandon society, Mrs. Verulam had not again openly alluded to it, or referred pointedly to Mr. Bush. She thought that to do so might be dangerous, so long as high collars were in fashion for men. Had Mr. Rodney worn a scarf, like a costermonger, she would have been troubled by no such delicacy. But perhaps she had hardly considered that, if Mr. Rodney were seized with convulsions on appreciating the possibility of her abandoning society, he would most probably be attacked by an enemy still more dreadful if he beheld society abandoning her, as now seemed possible. Women are so careless. Mr. Rodney, thinking of Mr. James Bush, drew forth his watch. In something less than a couple of hours that mysterious figure from the Marshes of Bungalow, that figure first seen shrouded in the romantic privacy of a reversed meat-safe, was due at the Palace. What then? What then? Mr. Rodney, forgetful of lunch, forgetful of his duties as cicerone of Ribton Marches, forgetful of the passing hour that may never return, forgetful even of the orchestrion, and of a life-size and life-like portrait of the Bun Empress in an orange-coloured tea-gown which stared upon him from the opposite wall of the purple drawing-room, plunged into the most solemn meditation, with his chin sunk down upon an opal breast-pin presented to him by an Austrian Archduchess. At length, coming once more to the surface, he recalled the fact that he had not arranged his hair since travelling, and that lunch was imminent. He therefore rose with a sigh to seek the "green bedroom," in which apartment he was to be accommodated during his stay in the Palace. But, owing to his ignorance of the building, or his absence of mind, or both, he strayed from the

right path, and endeavoured to make his way into the upper regions through a side door, and up a staircase which, not having been brought from abroad at an immense cost, was dedicated to the uses of the Bun Emperor's menials. As Mr. Rodney vaguely ascended this staircase, and when he was not quite half-way up, his attention was attracted by the tiny but sharp tingling of a bell in some hidden place below. He stopped, as one stops when arrested by some triviality in a dream. The tingling was renewed, and then the following monologue broke upon Mr. Rodney's listening ear:

"Yes, sir—yes, sir. Mr. Harrison, sir—Mr. Harrison. Because I did n't hear the bell, sir. I did n't hear the bell, sir. I did n't hear the— Because I was in the hall, sir—watching, sir, according to your directions. Yes, sir, they have arrived—the ones on the paper, sir—Mrs. Veddleham, Mr. Rodney, and Mr. Van Adams, sir. What do you say, sir?—one maid and one valet, sir—one maid and one— Not much to look at, sir. Which, sir—the valet or the maid? Oh, rather like a rat, sir. Rather like a ra— No, not the maid, sir, the valet. Yes, sir, I know I am—I know I'm responsible, I say, sir. Poke their noses? oh, on no account, sir—by no means—not at all—by no means, sir—not at— Now, sir? Mr. Rodney is in the purple drawing-room, sir—"

"Am I?" murmured that gentleman vaguely to himself on the stairs.

"The purp— Mrs. Veddleham, sir? She has retired, sir, to— Not fatigued, sir, retired. Seems very quiet, sir, so far. Not Mr. Adams, Mrs. Veddleham, sir. He has gone upstairs, sir—to his bedroom, sir—to brush his hair, I presume, sir—I presume to bru— I did n't take partic'lar notice, sir—I did n't take partic— I will, sir; oh, indeed you may depend—

Rely on me, sir—till I drop, sir—I say till I dr— I beg pardon, sir—the what, sir?—the what do you say, sir?—Partridges, sir?—Parliament do you say, sir?—I beg pardon—peppermint, sir?—pepperm—oh, parrots! Oh, dear, no, sir—oh, dear, no, they shall not be tamp— I say, sir, they shall not be, while I am here, sir— Thank you, sir, and the same to Mrs. Lite, sir.—Mr. Rodney, sir? Makes himself quite at home, sir—makes himself qui— I says they do not allow it to be employed in their absence, sir—they do not al— I thought you would, sir—I am glad I have done ri— Which, sir?—the which do you say, sir?—the parrots, sir? Do you say the parr— Oh, quite theirselves, so far, sir—I say they seem quite theirselves so far. A little quiet p'raps, sir—a little quieter than usual p'raps, sir— Only twice, sir, as I heard—only Hallelujah twice, sir, and rather low if anything, sir—lower than usual if anything, sir. I will notify you, sir—certainly, I will take care to noti— What, sir? Lame, sir, do you say? Which of 'em, sir? None of 'em are lame, sir—I say none of 'em are lame so far as I've— Not lame, sir! Not lame. James, sir—oh, I under— Mr. James Bush, sir!"

Mr. Rodney pricked up his ears at this point, and leaned a little lower upon the balustrade towards the hidden voice of the groom of the chambers.

"Mr. Bush, sir—oh, I will indeed—a special eye on him—certainly, sir. If he should I will indeed, sir—I say I will indeed if he should— I believe at three-fifteen, sir. If you will give me a mo—a moment I will see, sir—"

Here there was a pause, and a sound of paper rustling.

"It is three-fifteen, sir. In the hall, sir, I will indeed. Rely on— He shall not, sir—I say he shall

not, if I have to— Night, sir—do you say at night, sir? Very well, sir—I say ver— I will endeavour not to let him know it, sir. Softly, sir? Oh, most deci— Mr. Bush, sir? Do you say Mr. Bu— Rather him, sir, than the rest. I see—I say I see, sir. At all times after Mr. Bush, sir—yes.”

Just at this point Harry, Mr. Rodney’s man, appeared abruptly on the staircase, coming down, and almost ran into his bent-double master. Mr. Rodney hastily reared himself up to his full height.

“Kindly show me my room, Harry,” he said; “I am looking for it.”

“Certainly, sir,” said Harry, wondering very much why his master was looking for it over the balusters of the servants’ staircase. He turned back to usher his master to the green bedroom, and Mr. Rodney followed him in the deepest perplexity. What was this about James Bush? What was the man’s record? Of what nature was his history? Did the exiled Bun Emperor know more of him than met the eye? Did—

“This is your room, sir,” said Harry, throwing open a green door.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Verulam and Chloe had secured a moment to themselves in one of the winter gardens.

“I say,” said the latter, “Mr. Rodney’s getting very officious, almost as bad as that horrid little Mr. Inger-stall. He wants Harry to shave me!”

“What?” cried Mrs. Verulam, dropping a lump of sugar, by means of which she was tampering with one of the Bun Emperor’s favourites, much to the gratification of that individual.

“He does!”

“Harry!”

“His man.”

"Do n't let him, Chloe. Do n't be shaved. Let me imp—"

"My dear, is it likely? I told him I always did it myself. But still, these offers are afflicting."

"I wonder Mr. Rodney had n't more tact," began Mrs. Verulam. Then she recollected herself and laughed. "When shall I remember that you 're a man?" she said.

"Perhaps when you get no more invitation cards," said Chloe with solemnity.

"Oh, yes, yes!" cried Mrs. Verulam, ecstatically. "It has nearly come to that; the goal is in sight at last."

"I believe it is," said Chloe, rather grimly. "You do n't mean to tell me, Daisy, that you really are in earnest, that you really do want to be put out of this heavenly life?"

"Indeed, indeed I do! This week, perhaps, the cage door will open. Oh!" she clasped her hands in rapture. "This week!"

"Well, you are the most extraordinary creature! But I believe this week will decide it. Daisy, the Duchess means mischief."

"I know."

"I almost thought at the last moment she would n't come, that she would think you were too compromised and compromising."

"You do n't know her. She had n't got another invitation for Ascot; she is obliged to use me as a sort of hotel. Beside, you are here, and she's a woman of courage and resource. In spite of all, she still has hopes of you for Lady Pearl."

"It's rather a shame—that part, I mean; but it could n't be helped. Well, at any rate, I've played the time-honoured *rdle* of Carlsbad. I've cured her

daughter of the gout, that should be counted unto me for righteousness."

"It will, dear. It must. Oh, Chloe, I'm so excited!"

"Why?"

"How forgetful you are! In two hours *he* will be here. How wonderful it seems!"

"He? Oh, of course, Mr. Bush. Now, Daisy, if you really do wish to get out of society, do n't spoil everything by flirting with James Bush instead of with me."

"Flirting!" cried Mrs. Verulam, indignantly. "James Bush never flirts; he does n't know the meaning of the word."

"Then he ought to get one of those explanatory dictionaries—they're only half a dollar apiece."

"Do n't, Chloe. Do n't be flippant about Mr. Bush. It—it is n't suitable. When you see him you'll understand that in a moment. James Bush has a lofty nature, a little reserved, perhaps. He is apt to be reticent with strangers."

"Does that mean that he never opens his mouth to anyone who is n't a blood relation?"

"I should not go so far as to say that. Still, he is reticent."

"Then do n't put him next to me at dinner. Oh, I forgot, of course I shall sit between two women. What's Miss Bindler like?"

"Oh, one of those women who is so much more respectable than she looks that men always find her disappointing."

"I know, now that I've been in London a month."

"She lives by what she makes racing."

"How much is that?"

"A few hundreds a year, I fancy. She is quite a good soul, really."

"And Lady Drake? She's the only other one whom I have n't seen, except, of course, the paragon."

Mrs. Verulam blushed softly.

"Lady Drake? Well, she's a widow, you know."

"That tells me all, naturally."

"Nonsense. Her being a widow is really only a sort of accident in her life. Her husband was a V.C."

"What's that?"

"A brave man."

"What odd epithets you have over here. Well?"

"He's been dead thousands of years. She's intensely old."

"Why did you ask her, then?"

"Only because she worries the Duke."

"As Mr. Ingerstall worries the Duchess?"

"Oh, no; quite differently."

"Well, but why is the Duke to be worried, too? I do n't know him yet; I've only caught sight of him at Hurlingham. Why must he be worried?"

"If he is n't he is apt to get obstreperous—in quite, quite a different way from the Duchess. I can't explain, really. You'll soon find out. Oh, I forgot, though, you're a man at présent, so you won't."

Chloe smiled a rather charming smile of comprehension. But Mrs. Verulam was looking at her with a sort of dawning expression that seemed to mingle alarm with amusement.

"Unless," she added slowly, "unless he should chance to confide in you—in the smoking-room after *we've* all gone to bed."

"Gracious heavens! I shall go to bed, too."

"Yes, perhaps that would be better."

"I'm quite certain it would. I do n't want to feel like Daniel in the lions' den. There's the gong! Oh,

I 'm so hungry! That 's one advantage of being a man—one can eat more if one wishes to."

"Come along, then. But where 's—oh, here you are, Mr. Rodney."

Mr. Rodney at this moment entered, looking far more solemn than any owl, and, indeed, with knitted brows and a face almost entirely covered with an artistic disposition of wrinkles.

"Yes, I am here," he said, abstractedly. "Yes, here I am."

And they walked into the cedar-wood parlour to lunch.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. VERULAM'S IDEA OF AGAG

That curious cerebral condition which we call excitement affects men and women in very different ways. At 3:15 on this Monday afternoon it caused a nervous restlessness in Mrs. Verulam, a hectic calm in Mr. Rodney, and an apoplectic irritability in Mr. Harrison. The first of these victims of the nervous system talked incessantly; the second said nothing at all; the third abused the powdered Frederick, had a "few words"—fifty thousand or thereabouts—with the cook of Ribton Marches, and fell foul of the second housemaid, with whom, in moments of condescension, he was rather apt than otherwise to keep company. And all these circumstances were brought about by Mr. James Bush, at that very moment driving from the Sunningdale station to the palace, with his very large feet up on the cushions of the carriage, and his very small bag of necessities up on the box. However, he was kept awake by no warning instinct which told him of the turmoil cast before him by his personality, but, on the contrary, slept profoundly, and even snored, with his great head well back on the hood of the barouche. He was awakened by the stoppage of the carriage before the palace door. Inside, in the baronial hall, the crunching of the gravel was heard, and Mrs. Verulam had just said, with elaborate indifference: "Dear me! Can this be Mr. Bush already?"

Mr. Rodney had looked at his watch, and answered:
"I fancy so."

And Chloe had exclaimed:

"By Jove! Bungay Marshes to the front!" a remark which she considered manly, and calculated to impress Mr. Rodney, which it did—with horror.

The palace menials advanced at the double, accompanied by Mr. Harrison, who proceeded with an air of extraordinary precaution, and the drawn expression of one who believes himself to be on the point of catching a murderer red-handed. The mighty portals flew slowly open, and the carriage was revealed, with Mr. Bush laid out in it, his mouth wide open in a yawn, and his fists in his eyes rubbing the slumber out of them, while his snort of astonishment at the sudden interruption of his delicious reveries was distinctly audible in the still summer air.

"What 's all this? What the devil is it all?" he said, in a huge and rumbling voice to the menials who came forward to assist him from the barouche.

"Ribton Marches, sir," said the powdered Frederick, while Mr. Harrison looked as if doubtful whether it were not his duty to run Mr. Bush in upon the spot without further ado.

"Marchuss?" retorted Mr. Bush—"Marchuss?"

"Yes, sir. Won't you get out, sir?"

Mr. Bush rolled out, rather as a barrel rolls out of a dray down an inclined plane into a vault. Planting his feet upon the marble steps, he turned round and said:

"Lay hold of that bag!"

Frederick laid hold of it with the arms of a man anticipating a considerable weight. As the bag, however, appeared to contain nothing of much greater bulk than a collar-stud, the footman was nearly thrown down by

the unexpected triviality of his labour. He almost dropped the bag.

"You 'd better!" said Mr. Bush—"you'd better!"

The alarmed menial met the Bungay Marshes eye, and apparently thought he had better not, for he ascended the steps with some rapidity, and vanished into the interior of the palace in the twinkling of an eye.

Mr. Bush lethargically moved onward into the baronial hall, in which Mrs. Verulam, Mr. Rodney, and Chloe were seated.

"Oh, Mr. Bush," cried the former, rising with a lovely blush, and coming forward to meet him, "I am so glad to see you!"

That gentleman grunted, and permitted her to take his hand.

"It is so good of you to come and leave your lovely garden, and all your sheep, and—and bees. Let me introduce you to Mr. Rodney and Mr. Van Adam. The rest of the party come this afternoon."

Mr. Bush threw a couple of nods at Mr. Rodney and Chloe. Then he abruptly exclaimed:

"What are you after, eh?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Bush," said Mrs. Verulam, in some surprise.

"What are you after?" pursued her gracious guest, with a very sinister intonation.

"Oh, nothing, sir, not at all, by no means!" replied a rather hurried voice, and Mr. Harrison somewhat hastily retreated from a shadowy nook in which he had been taking observations, until that moment erroneously supposed by him to be secret.

"Really, Mr. Rodney?" said Mrs. Verulam, rather petulantly, "that man is becoming very unnecessary. Can't you keep him in order?"

"I will endeavour—I will certainly endeavour to do so," returned Mr. Rodney, in some disorder, turning to pursue Mr. Harrison. Mrs. Verulam had a way of behaving as if he were responsible for everything and everybody in the palace, which he began to find distinctly trying.

"Yes, please do," said Mrs. Verulam. "Would you like to go to your room at once, Mr. Bush, or will you rest a little first?"

"I'll rest there. I'll have a lay down," he replied, yawning—"a good lay down."

And, without further parley, he set out for the upper regions of the palace, his boots squeaking as he walked. When the squeaking had died away, Mrs. Verulam turned rapturously to Chloe.

"Well, dear?" she said—"well?"

"Well," responded Chloe, with a good deal of hesitation.

"Is n't he simple? Is n't he straightforward and natural?"

"Oh, quite—quite."

"Yes. And is n't it a relief to find a man like that after all the shams and hypocrisies of society? One is never in doubt about what Mr. Bush is thinking, or what he means. One *knows* it."

"I should think so."

"Yes; I knew you would agree with me. Oh, how delightful it is to have one friend who feels in all things as one does one's self!"

"Daisy, do n't! You forget—you must n't kiss me."

"Oh, heavens! Could anybody have seen?"

She glanced apprehensively round.

"No; it is all right. But I knew you would. A large, frank nature like that seems to go straight to all

that is good and right in one. Oh, do let us take advantage of our opportunity this week! Do—do let us make the most of it.”

“Do you mean that Mr. Bush is our opportunity?”

“Yes—yes.”

“Well, dear, I do n’t mind, I’m sure. But the most of Mr. Bush is a great deal. I think he is the largest human being I have ever seen. Now I’m going to wander about the garden and see what the Bun Emperor’s plants are like.”

And Chloe went off, wondering greatly at her friend’s enthusiasm for the gentleman from Bungay. She, herself, could at present see nothing in him but a mountain of humanity, with that face, head, beard, and expression already described as appearing to Mrs. Verulam in the imaginary mirror of the cotillon of her fancy. Nor could his manner—essentially truthful, as no doubt it was—be called precisely pleasing. Chloe picked a rose or two and lost herself in wonder. Meanwhile, Mrs. Verulam wandered ecstatically about the palace. Mr. Harrison was busy with the Bun Emperor at the telephone. Mr. Rodney was plunged once more in terrible meditation in the purple drawing-room, and Mr. Bush was enjoying to the utmost his good lay down on one of the Empress’s largest spring mattresses. He woke soon after the arrival of the rest of the party, and strolled heavily forth alone into the grounds to take the air, which had not circulated very freely beneath the quilt with which his head had been completely covered during the last hour and a half.

Meanwhile the baronial hall looked fuller of people than it had ever looked before in its life. Tea was going on, but Mrs. Verulam had declined to allow Mr. Bush to be disturbed.

"He will come in his own good time," she said. "I don't wish to bother him. He is accustomed to perfect liberty."

She addressed the company generally. The Duke of Southborough, who resembled an unusually tall pantaloons in appearance, but was not entirely unlike a clown in manner, said in reply:

"Ah, then, I suppose he's a bachelor."

"Oh, of course," said Mrs. Verulam, with a secret glance at Chloe.

"Poor chap! poor chap!" said the Duke, with his funny demeanour of an actor being remarkably successful in his part. "What a sad business this anti-matrimonial bias that is growing up in the present generation of Englishmen is! Eh, Lady Drake?"

Lady Drake, who was the human equivalent of the most perfect sort of acid-drop that the power of the sugar-plum manufacturer has ever yet produced, shook her head, on which the hair reposed in bandeaux.

"Men are more selfish than the lower animals, fear," she said, sweetening her tea with some modern preparation which she always carried about with her in a good-sized phial.

"Oh, Mr. Bush is a most self-sacrificing man, I assure you," said Mrs. Verulam quickly.

"Then why is he a bachelor? That's what Lady Drake means," said the Duke, with a Drury Lane pantomime wink at the company.

"I think the French way of doing things by far the best," cried Mr. Ingerstall, lifting a muffin to his mouth as a juggler poises a billiard-ball on the rounded tip of a cue. "The Frenchman marries as a matter of course, and with no more intention of curtailing his full liberty of action than—"

"The French point of view in that matter is scarcely a suitable subject for discussion, Mr. Ingerstall," said the Duchess of Southborough, very severely, while the Duke chuckled to himself: "Full liberty of action! Very good! very good indeed! Ha, ha, ha!" Mr. Ingerstall violently engaged her Grace—began to worry the Duchess, as Chloe said to herself—while Miss Bindler, a wiry lady of about five-and-thirty, who had a face like a horse, a tailor-made manner and boots with spats, turned to Mr. Rodney and asked him what he was going to back on the following day.

"I expect to make a bit on Cubicle in the first race," she said.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Rodney. "I trust I may do the same."

"Did you get a good price?"

"What for?" said Mr. Rodney. Did I say that I had sold anything?"

This remark shows that the pressure of circumstances was becoming rather too much for the owner of Mitching Dean. In fact, he was considerably agitated. Since her arrival the Duchess had taken him aside and indulged him with some very dreadful confidences. Her Grace had been pleased to tell him, "as an old friend," that she had been on the very point of telegraphing at the last moment to Mrs. Verulam to give up her visit.

"She has been going too far, Mr. Rodney," said the Duchess, in a whispering bass. "She has disgusted London."

"Disgusted London!" cried the appalled confidant. "Oh, no; impossible!"

"You think nothing could; but you are wrong. There is a limit, even in our world, and she has over-

stepped it. You will see that to-morrow in the enclosure. Old Martha Sage intends to cut her."

"Impossible!" reiterated Mr. Rodney, the perspiration starting in beads upon his narrow forehead.

"Nothing is impossible to Martha Sage. I assure you it is the fact."

"It must be prevented," cried Mr. Rodney. "It must, it shall!"

He felt as Curtius probably did when he found that he really was in the gulf.

"I do n't see how it can be," said the Duchess. "You do n't know Martha Sage."

"But indeed I do," said Mr. Rodney. "She has often dandled me in her arms."

"What, recently?"

"Yes, yes," he rejoined distractedly, "often and often."

"Possibly you may have some influence over her then," said the Duchess; "and, indeed, if what you say is true, I hardly think Martha Sage has the right to take the initiative in such an affair."

"When I was a little boy—when I was a child," said Mr. Rodney, recovering himself in time to save Lady Sage's vanishing reputation with the Duchess.

"Oh, that's nothing. She has dandled everybody at that age. But she does n't allow anybody to influence her decisions for all that."

"Then Mrs. Verulam must be kept out of the enclosure," cried Mr. Rodney, wringing his hands together. "She must and shall!"

"That will only delay the matter," said her Grace calmly. "In fact, Mr. Rodney—but this I tell you in the strictest confidence—if I do n't observe a very great

change in Mrs. Verulam's behaviour during this week, I am very much afraid that I shall be obliged to agree with Martha Sage. Oh, is it tea-time?"

It was this terrible conversation which had reduced Mr. Rodney to making a *mal-à-propos* reply, a thing he had scarcely ever done before in the whole course of his social life. He was immersed in thought, considering whether he ought not solemnly to warn Mrs. Verulam of her danger, or whether, on the other hand, he should go privately to Lady Sage, recall the dandling incident to her Crimean War recollection, and implore her, for her old intimacy's sake, to be merciful, and to bow to the Ribton Marches party on the morrow. He could not decide. He could not come to a conclusion. And Miss Bindler very soon gave him up in despair, and took to a close and exhaustive study of her betting-book. This study, Mr. Rodney's gloomy agonies, the Duke's jokes, Mr. Ingerstall's recollections of Parisian life and art, and, indeed, everything that was going on in the baronial hall, was, however, interrupted very shortly by the sudden entry of Mr. James Bush, with disordered and earthy costume, breathing stertorously, and looking rather puffy about the cheeks. Mrs. Verulam greeted him with a delighted smile, and was about to make him known to the fresh arrivals, when he broke in upon her "Oh, Mr. Bush, let me intro—" with the loud and rather startling exclamation, uttered in evident bitter sarcasm, "You've got nice company here!"

"What!" said Mrs. Verulam, while the assembled magnates joined in a simultaneous start of astonishment.

"Well, I'm blowed!" continued Mr. Bush. "You've got nice company!"

"I hope so, indeed!" murmured Mrs. Verulam. "Let me make you known to them. Mr. Bush—the Duchess

of Southborough, Lady Pearl McAndrew—" She named her guests.

Mr. Bush plunged his head in their direction, without deigning to glance at them.

"Mad, I s'pose!" he resumed to Mrs. Verulam. "Mad as Moses!"

Consternation now reigned among the inmates of the palace, who began to fear that Mr. Bush was giving a name to his own private affliction. Even Mrs. Verulam felt a certain diffidence steal over her at so definite an inclusion of all her party within the sad circle of a supposititious lunacy. But she guessed Mr. Bush to be a bit of a wag, like most great men. Doubtless he was only having his little joke. Still, she felt quite definitely that this fact should be made apparent to the Duchess and others with as short a delay as possible, so she hastened to reply:

"Ah, Mr. Bush, you must n't make a joke on so serious a subject as madness."

"Joke! There's no joke! Where's the joke of being potted at like a rook in January? Joke, indeed—joke!"

He blew forth a perfect volume of angry breath.

"A rook in January?" said poor Mrs. Verulam, in consummate perplexity, and really beginning to have her fears for her guest's reason.

"Ay. If I'd have stayed he'd have had me. I was n't eight paces off him."

"Unless the other gentleman was an unusually indifferent shot," remarked the Duke, glancing at Mr. Bush's gigantic bulk. "I must say I think Mr. Bush must have stood in some slight danger. Did you not stay, then?" his Grace added, addressing himself to the narrator.

"Stay? Not I! I just ducked down on all fours, and came back like a beast through the rhododendrons."

"Indeed!" continued the Duke, pleasantly. "A very sensible posture and mode of exit under the circumstances. Who's your sportsman?" he added, turning to Mrs. Verulam.

"I have no idea, indeed!" she replied, in perplexity unutterable. "Oh, Mr. Bush!" she added, with a most tender accent of commiseration, "I can scarcely tell you how grieved, how horrified I am, that you should have been so nearly murdered—and so soon after your arrival, too!"

"I should think so!" Mr. Bush rejoined angrily. "A nice thing to happen to a respectable man!"

His tacit refusal to be mollified reacted upon his hostess, who, as usual in untoward circumstances, turned instantly upon the man who she thought loved her.

"Mr. Rodney," she said, with bitter reproach, "you never told me there was a murderer living in this neighbourhood."

"I never knew it!" cried Mr. Rodney. "It never occurred to me, I do assure you. Where were you?" he exclaimed to Mr. Bush, with the poignant accent of a man whose reputation is at stake.

"I was walkin' in the garden, a-lookin' at the mistakes the gardener here 's been makin'," said Mr. Bush, sulkily.

"Yes, yes!" chorussed the company.

"Presently I came to a bit of a pond, with flowers a-floatin' on it."

"Ah!" suddenly cried Mr. Rodney, in an illuminated manner. "And a cottage on the further side?"

"Ay; where he fires from."

"The Bun Emperor!" exclaimed Mr. Rodney, as if the matter was settled.

"Very unsportsmanlike behaviour," said Miss Bindler, "to shoot from such cover as that. The game have n't a ghost of a chance."

"You 're right, mum," said Mr. Bush, "they have n't—not unless they 're as quick at droppin' on all fours as I am."

"But I can't understand it even yet," pursued Mr. Rodney. "The Emperor's really not a bad sort of man, as a general rule. Did you do anything in particular by the pond, Mr. Bush?"

"Not I. I only stood a-lookin' at the little house. I saw a fattish, smallish feller, with a fattish, smallish woman by his side, starin' out—"

"The Empress, too!" said Mr. Rodney. "Well, Mr. Bush?"

"But I did n't take any account of them at first. I put out my stick across the water to lay hold of some of the lilies, when what does the fattish man do but shout out, 'If you do it, I'll skin you!' I did n't choose to notice his nonsense, and I'd just got hold of a lily, when what do I see but him with a gun at his shoulder firin' straight at me. So, as I say, I came away like a beast through the bushes."

Mr. Rodney seemed perfectly at ease.

"Mr. Lite always is a little hasty," he said. "The matter is perfectly clear to me. He does n't like anything being interfered with."

"A defender of the rights of property," said the Duke, approvingly. "A good Conservative."

"Still, he goes too far," said Mrs. Verulam, in considerable agitation. "Mr. Rodney, I must ask you to be kind enough to tell Mr. Lite that I cannot have my house-party shot at. Make it perfectly clear, please."

As a hostess, I cannot and will not permit anything of that kind."

"Certainly, certainly," said Mr. Rodney; "I see your point of view."

"If you won't have any more tea, it would be very good of you to go to the fishing cottage at once," said Mrs. Verulam. "Some of us might like to stroll about the grounds presently, and I am sure we shall all prefer to have Mr. Lite's solemn promise of amendment before we do so."

These words were received with an emphatic chorus of unfeigned assent, so poor Mr. Rodney, who had only half finished his first cup, was obliged to get up and fare forth into the afternoon. He went gloomily, feeling that his Ascot this year was evidently to be a period of hard labour, and that Mrs. Verulam, like many women, was inclined to make mountains out of mole-hills. Not that James Bush could be accurately described as a mole-hill. Nevertheless, under the circumstances, Mr. Rodney's sympathies lay very decidedly with Mr. Lite. Indeed, as he walked tealess in the sun, he gradually worked himself up into a perfect fever of perfervid pity for the wrongs of the outraged exile, practically homeless by the waterside, and forced to behold the assaults of such an enemy as the man who had so foully influenced Mrs. Verulam against society. Moved by this wild access of emotion, Mr. Rodney burst into the fishing cottage like a well-bred volcano, leapt into the tiny parlour which for the moment accommodated the unfortunate Lites, and, seizing Mr. Lite by the hand, exclaimed in a voice that trembled with feeling:

"You have all my sympathy; I am entirely—entirely

on your side. If you had hit him, I do n't think I could blame you—I do n't, indeed!"

The Bun Emperor, who had an enormous pair of strong field-glasses in one hand, and was in the very act of ringing the telephone-bell to summon Mr. Harrison with the other, looked for an instant petrified by this intrusion; and the Empress cried out in shrill alarm from her station in the minute bay-window built to fit a fisherman. Mr. Rodney breathlessly continued:

"I know what you—what any man worthy of the name—must feel on seeing such a—such a—a spectacle, yes, as that man daring to make away with the flowers that have been floating on those waters perhaps for centuries."

The pond was exactly two years and three months old.

"What d'you mean?" gasped Mr. Lite, at length getting in an ejaculation edgewise. "Are you mad?"

"I wish you had shot him—yes, I do!" cried Mr. Rodney, frantically eulogizing British assassination; and he threw himself into an adjacent wicker-chair in a most Corsican manner.

The Empress waived again from her embrasure.

"Oh, Perry, save me—save me!" was her natural cry.

"I will, Henrietta—I will, my love," said the Emperor. "Keep up." After these reassuring words he advanced in a threatening manner upon Mr. Rodney, and remarked: "Give over! D'you hear me? Give over!"

"I beg your pardon," murmured Mr. Rodney, exhausted by his unwonted vocal exertions.

"Give over, or I'll lay my hands on you—I will."

"But I am sympathizing with you—I am—"

"Sympathizing!" said the Emperor, still maintaining

a posture of protection and defence; "what for? what over?"

"Your manly attempt to shoot James Bush," said Mr. Rodney, giving himself away with extraordinary indifference to the opinion of the civilized world on criminal affairs.

At the name the Emperor's manner changed. His black eyes blazed, and he shook the field-glass as if it had been a fist.

"It was him, then," he cried—"it was him as I saw through the telescope!"

"The telescope!" said Mr. Rodney, suddenly penetrated by a ray of light.

He turned rapidly in the wicker-chair, and threw a distracted glance towards the embrasure. In it, reposing upon a window-seat, was an enormous telescope. Mr. Rodney began to comprehend, and to see the necessity of reconsidering his position under these much less violent circumstances.

"Then you did n't fire at him?" he said, with an abrupt lamb-like serenity.

"Fire at him!" said the Emperor. "What are you talking about? When he went for Mrs. Lite's lilies I said I'd skin him; and so I would have, or telephoned Mr. Harrison to, if he had n't dropped into the ground for all the world like a mole or a badger. I do n't know where he went to, though I had my eye to the telescope, and Mrs. Lite she was looking through the field-glasses."

"He behaved like vermin," remarked the Empress, at this juncture. "Like a rat he went, he did. Never did I see a Christian demean himself so till this day—never, no!"

"The man's a coward," said Mr. Rodney with firmness—"an arrant coward. I shall inform Mrs. Verulam."

And he suddenly broke from the Emperor and Empress and absconded towards the palace, leaving them immersed in helpless astonishment.

Returning with rapid steps into the baronial hall, he found the party preparing to set forth into the grounds on receiving his assurances that the Emperor had laid aside his gun for the time being.

"You are perfectly safe," said Mr. Rodney, with unwonted sarcasm, and calmly waving one white hand towards the estate; "you will not be hurt, I can promise you. Nobody will attempt to injure you."

The guests were obviously relieved, and they began at once to evaporate, Mr. Ingerstall escorting the Duchess, the Duke with Lady Drake, Chloe accompanying the Lady Pearl, and Miss Bindler bringing up the rear in sturdy solitude. Mr. Bush remained because he had not nearly finished munching his tea, and Mrs. Verulam stayed because she loved to see him munch.

"You have persuaded him, then?" she said approvingly to the ambassador. "I knew you would have weight with him."

But even this compliment could not divert Mr. Rodney from his purpose of unmasking the man who had behaved like a badger in the moment of supposed peril.

"My dear lady," he said, glancing with elaborate pity towards Mr. Bush, who was closely engaged with a tea-cake, "there was nothing to persuade. I am happy to say that you have been totally misinformed as to the circumstances."

"Eh?" growled Mr. Bush, stirring his spoon vigorously in his tea-cup—"eh?"

"Totally and absolutely misinformed," repeated Mr. Rodney with greatest decision.

"Really, Mr. Rodney," said Mrs. Verulam, prepar-

ing to fire up, "what are you saying? Mr. Bush has been shot at."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Rodney, very blandly — "I beg your pardon."

"If I had n't a dropped, I should n't be here now," said Mr. Bush, in a voice whose timbre was slightly obscured by tea-cake.

Mr. Rodney turned towards him.

"I assure you, my dear Mr. Bush," he said, "that you are labouring under an entire delusion; you might, with perfect safety, have retained an upright posture. It's true that Mr. Lite made use of some hasty, inconsiderate words about skinning."

"There!" roared Mr. Bush; "what did I say?"

"But even they were no doubt rather metaphorical than strictly truthful. As to the firing, however, you were quite mistaken. What you took for a gun was merely a telescope. When you thought you were being shot at, you were only being looked at. There is an appreciable difference between the two operations. I think you will allow that."

And the owner of Mitching Dean calmly dropped into a chair, and prepared to continue his interrupted tea. Mr. Bush looked remarkably sulky under this light of truth.

"Telescope, indeed!" he muttered; "telescope, I daresay."

"So you see Mr. Lite can hardly be blamed after all," said Mr. Rodney cheerfully to Mrs. Verulam.

"Perhaps not," she said, a little doubtfully. "However, he should be more careful how he looks at people."

And then she rather hastily dropped the subject. In her secret heart she was sorry to find that the Emperor

was not so given to murder as Mr. Bush had led her to suppose. Women love their heroes to stand uprightly even in moments of imminent danger. They infinitely prefer them not to quail before a telescope, however suddenly handled.

Mrs. Verulam could not entirely banish from her heart the uneasy conviction that, on this occasion, Mr. Bush had scarcely lived up to what she confidently expected of the man who was her idea of Agag.

CHAPTER X

MR. RODNEY SCREAMS

That evening in the hall after dinner the Duke chanced to say:

"Another top-hat Ascot! I wish the Prince would set the fashion of billycocks. What do you say, Mr. Bush? Would n't you rather have a low hat in the heat? Anything low is always so pleasant—between you and me. Eh? What—what?"

The paragon observed the grinning pantaloon face solemnly, and then answered:

"Top-hats are rubbish. I've only brought a straw."

Mr. Rodney turned as pale as ashes.

"I shan't wear nought but a straw to-morrer," proceeded the paragon with heavy calmness.

"A savage custom?" squeaked Lady Drake inquiringly.

"I hate a man to be over-dressed," ejaculated Miss Bindler approvingly.

"I beg your pardon," Mr. Rodney said suddenly, in a trembling voice—"I beg your pardon, but I must venture to say that I feel certain Major Clement will turn a—
—a straw off the lawn. Knowing him as I do, I feel confidently certain of it." And he cast a glance of passionate beseeching upon Mrs. Verulam.

For once she came to his rescue.

"I quite agree with Mr. Bush," she said; "a straw is much more sensible—"

"Merciful heavens!" in an under cry of acute anguish from Mr. Rodney.

"In every way. But at the same time, Mr. Bush, don't you think that custom should occasionally be adhered to?"

"Eh?"

"Every man will be wearing a top-hat to-morrow."

Mr. Bush began to look very sulky.

"I've hoed and I've planted in a straw for thirty year," he muttered, "day in, day out."

"There's no hoeing and planting on a racecourse," said Mr. Rodney, with vehement sarcasm.

"It'd make the going a bit heavy," said Miss Bindler reflectively.

"I fancy, Mr. Bush," said Mrs. Verulam very gently, "that as you will not have any opportunity of hoeing at the races to-morrow, owing to all the silly rules and regulations, you will find it really pleasanter to be as everyone else is—I mean only, of course, as regards your head-covering."

"I have n't a-brought one," he mumbled; "I say I've only brought a straw."

"We must send a man to Windsor," said Mr. Rodney, with a sudden piercing decision, and he pushed eighteen times at an electric bell. The powdered Frederick appeared.

"Kindly bring us a yard measure," said Mr. Rodney.

"A what, sir?" exclaimed the man.

"A yard measure, and order a dog-cart round; there is much to do to-night."

The powdered Frederick dropped his lower jaw like one confronted with the mysteries of Udolpho, and fled to execute these sinister commands. He returned, accompanied by Mr. Harrison, who had impounded a

yard measure with his left hand, and whose eyes were starting out of his head with suspicion. The house-party were now tense with excitement as medical students gathered to witness the operation of the century. Only Mr. Rodney was wrapped in a white and still calm; he held out his long, thin hand for the yard measure, but Mr. Harrison showed a bold front.

"Mr. Lite's last orders to me, sir," he began, shaking his bald head emphatically—"his last orders to me was: 'On no account, Mr. Harrison, is the carriages to be measured.' Oh, by no means must it be so done—oh, indeed, on no account whatever!"

"The carriages!" said Mr. Rodney, getting very red at this speech for the defence—"the carriages! It is this gentleman's head!" He pointed to the paragon.

"I understood, sir, from Frederick, that the dog-cart—oh, indeed, was ordered to be—"

But at this point Mr. Rodney snatched the tape from the protecting hand that secluded it, advanced heroically upon the paragon, measured the circumference of his enormous cranium, wrote the measurement down with a gold pencil on a sheet of writing-paper, gave it to the powdered Frederick, said: "Have that taken at once to Windsor, rouse up the best hatter in the royal borough, buy a top-hat of that size, and bring it back as fast as the horse can gallop," and then sank down on a sofa with the air of a man who, having stormed the heights, dies of his own bravery as he grasps the standard of the enemy.

"A glass of water," he murmured.

It was brought. He recovered, and shortly afterwards the spectators of the operation of the century retired to their respective bedrooms, conscious that they had been assisting at a historical event, but a little

divided as to the complete tact and generalship shown by Mr. Rodney.

That night, when the faithful Marriner came into the primrose bedroom to brush Mrs. Verulam's pretty hair before the latter went to bed, she found her mistress in a very serious mood. And, on her side, Marriner was also unusually grave, although her demeanour, chastened as it was by Schopenhauer and an acquaintance with Nordau, which might almost be termed intimate, was invariably, and at all times, sedate and thoughtful. Chloe had adroitly avoided the smoking-room, in which the Duke was now telling stories to Mr. Ingerstall; while Mr. Rodney wrote up his diary, and Mr. Bush dreamed over a whisky and soda of gigantic proportions. Mr. Harrison, above stairs, was with much tribulation and uncurled whiskers preparing his report to lay before the Emperor at eight o'clock on the following morning. The Duchess was asleep. Miss Bindler was considering the chances of the morrow. The Lady Pearl was dreaming softly of the person whom, in secret, she now named Huskinson; and Lady Drake, who though acid had an extraordinarily sweet tooth, was eating chocolate creams in a dressing-gown made from an Indian shawl presented to her by a very great personage indeed.

The faithful Marriner removed a hairpin and breathed a sigh simultaneously. Mrs. Verulam echoed the sigh, and hearing that she had been honoured with an echo, Marriner ventured to say:

"Oh, ma'am!"

"Why do you say 'oh,' Marriner?" said Mrs. Verulam. "What should you have to say 'oh' about?"

"Many things, ma'am—many, many things," responded Marriner, in a doleful voice.

"Have any more thoughts been taking you like a storm, Marriner?"

"They have, indeed, ma'am."

"If you think so much you ought to keep a lifeboat by you," said Mrs. Verulam, dreamily.

For her hair was now being brushed and was giving off electricity, and the process soothed her.

"Might I speak, ma'am?" said Marriner, making use of her habitual formula when she had anything special to say.

"You may, certainly."

"Ma'am," said Marriner, "I've heard a dreadful thing this night."

"Dreadful! What about?"

"Oh, ma'am, that I should have to say it—about you!" replied the faithful creature, with every outward sign of extreme dejection.

Mrs. Verulam started beneath the brush.

"A dreadful thing about me, Marriner! Who from?"

"From Mrs. Crouch, ma'am, her Grace's woman."

"Why, what should Mrs. Crouch say about me?"

"Oh, ma'am, she says, ma'am, that Lady Sage is—is—"

"Do n't break down, Marriner, you'll wet my hair. Please go on."

Thus adjured, Marriner continued in a fragmentary voice, as one relating something almost too improper to be given tongue to:

"She says that—oh, that Lady Sage is going to have nothing at all to do with you in the Enclosure to-morrow, ma'am—oh, dear, dear me!"

Mrs. Verulam sat still in silence for a moment. It must be confessed that during the moment she felt as if she was being whipped.

"Oh, ma'am, do n't go—do n't go there!" continued Marriner. "We should not place ourselves between the feet of our enemies, ma'am; no, no, we should not!"

"Be careful with the brush, Marriner, please," said Mrs. Verulam, in a rather low voice.

"But that 's not all, ma'am—there is worse, ma'am—there is treachery, indeed, and there is treason, ma'am."

"Really, one would think that Guy Fawkes was staying in the house," rejoined Mrs. Verulam, recovering herself a little.

"No, ma'am, indeed it is not him."

"Then who is it?"

"Oh, ma'am—her Grace."

"The Duchess!" said Mrs. Verulam, in slight surprise.

"Yes, ma'am; Mrs. Crouch says, indeed, that her Grace will do as her Ladyship—Lady Sage—does, when the week is over, ma'am. And it is all because of Mrs. Van Adam—taking her for a man, ma'am. Oh, do—please, please do tell them, ma'am!"

"The teeth of the comb! Be careful, Marriner, please!"

"Yes, ma'am, I will. But I do implore you, ma'am, if I might—"

"Hush!" cried Mrs. Verulam suddenly; "let me think! Brush softly, Marriner, if you have any regard for me."

Marriner brushed softly, and Mrs. Verulam thought for a long while, hating Lady Sage and the Duchess for themselves, womanlike, yet half inclined—or tricking herself to think so—to love their coming deed. James Bush, too, and the squirrel Tommy, and the cage-door, and the different, the true, earnest, sincere, unaffected life—thoughts of all these ran through that pretty head beneath the shining hair, until the weary brusher ceased,

and Mrs. Verulam said, "You may go to bed, Marriner; good-night."

In consequence of Marriner's revelation, when, on the following morning shortly before the Ribton Marches party started for the course, Mr. Rodney mysteriously begged to be allowed to speak with Mrs. Verulam alone, she was not much surprised by what he had to say, although, for some perhaps feminine reason, she pretended to be so.

"Could I have just a word with you?" Mr. Rodney said, in a voice not wholly unlike that of a sucking dove.

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Verulam. "Where?"

"I think there is no one in the pink boudoir."

"Let us go there, then."

They went, furtively watched by Mr. Harrison, who had just returned from the fishing cottage in possession of that rather unacceptable belonging usually called a flea in the ear. For he had found the Emperor in a terrible condition of fury over the James Bush business and various other incidents of the preceding day. When Mrs. Verulam and Mr. Rodney had gained the pink boudoir, the latter carefully closed the pink door, walked very gently up to Mrs. Verulam, and said:

"Where do you think of watching the races from, may I venture to ask?"

"Where from? The Enclosure, of course!"

"Shall we sit down for a moment?" replied Mr. Rodney, with a consummate endeavour after genial ease.

They sat down on a couple of flesh-coloured chairs, and he proceeded with extraordinary blandness:

"The Enclosure! Do n't you think it is likely to be excessively hot?"

Mrs. Verulam instantly guessed that Mr. Rodney knew what the faithful Marriner knew.

"Hot," she said, "why specially hot in the Enclosure?"

"Well, you know, in consequence of its being so difficult to gain admission to, it is so very much more crowded than any other part of the course. Do n't you think so?"

"Well, but where else shall I go?"

"I have ventured to take a couple of excellent boxes. You see one or two of our party, Mr. Ingerstall and Mr. Bush, have not got cards for the Enclosure."

Mr. Rodney just glanced at his boots. Mrs. Verulam had never liked him better than at this moment. Nevertheless, she was a woman, and, as all her sex, sweetly mischievous.

"It is very good and thoughtful of you; still, I think I shall go to the Enclosure. Mr. Van Adam is anxious to see what it is like."

Mr. Rodney stiffened.

"Indeed!"

"And then there are all one's friends there—Lady Clondart and Lady Sage, and—"

Mr. Rodney became as cold as the adventurer who approaches the Pole. He saw Mrs. Verulam rushing headlong to her doom, and he did not know how to stop her.

"Lady Sage grows a little wearisome, I fancy," he murmured dissuasively.

"Do you think so? Oh, I love her recollections!"

"I think her too historical for hot summer weather, I confess," continued Mr. Rodney; "and then her insatiable appetite for dates."

"Oh, surely she would n't eat them in the Enclosure!" cried Mrs. Verulam. "The master of the buckhounds would never permit it!"

"The dates of battles, dear lady, not dried fruits. Really, if you prefer to go to the Enclosure, I strongly—very strongly—advise you to avoid Lady Sage. She is agreeable in a drawing-room, but very, very Crimean, I do assure you, on a racecourse. Do give me your word; I cannot bear to see you bored!"

"You are all kindness," said Mrs. Verulam, secretly longing to pat this kind and true friend upon his anxious face. "I must go to the Enclosure, but I shall probably not see Lady Sage. Now the carriages must be round."

Mr. Rodney, in his usual soft manner, opened the pink door, and was instantly confronted by Mr. Harrison, who, with tightly-shut eyes, was revealed in a crouched attitude with his left ear glued to what, had the door been shut, would doubtless have been the key-hole. This surprising vision caused Mr. Rodney to start, and the groom of the chambers, in some obvious confusion, assumed a less attentive posture, and added:

"I was about to inform you, sir—in the temporary absence of all the men servants—that the carriages are now before the door—oh, most certainly!"

He then proceeded to retire with a deliberate, but distinct celerity.

"That man is really of a very original turn of body," remarked Mrs. Verulam, as they went downstairs.

"He carries it too far in my opinion," replied Mr. Rodney, with considerable severity.

That day was to Mr. Rodney a day of trial, and of acute anxiety. It might truly be said that he did not have one moment's peace during the whole course of it. He attended Mrs. Verulam into the Enclosure, which was, as he had foreseen, most uncomfortably full and crowded, and spent his time there in a faithful endeavour to emulate the procedure of the trained private detective.

His eye, to which he tried to give that unmarkable acuteness attributed to the eye of the lynx, was ever upon the lookout for the approach of Lady Sage, and when he saw that redoubtable survival of pre-Crimean days moving afar off beneath a huge bonnet in form like a helmet, he ingeniously glided Mrs. Verulam into some other part of the royal pen, engaging her the while vigorously in conversation, and leading unsuspecting countesses and others to cover up her tracks in a masterly manner. Being a man, he thought that she was quite unaware that for four hours she was subtly being dodged about, and when at length the last race was over, and he placed her in the barouche, he fancied that the sigh of triumph which he could not help breathing was supposed by her to be merely a tribute to the heat.

The great lawn that stretched before the glittering windows of the palace; the mighty cedar-tree beneath which the powdered Frederick and his fellow-menials now arranged the tea-tables—these works of Nature appeared exceedingly charming to the dusty eyes of the Ribton Marches house-party as they flocked anxiously out to refresh themselves after the torments of a day of pleasure. But not all had returned. Mr. James Bush and Mr. Ingerstall were absent. Lady Drake, exceedingly acidulated in airy black; the Duchess, full of bass conversation about the events of the day, but ever watchful of Chloe and Mrs. Verulam; Miss Bindler and the Duke talking racing; Chloe and the Lady Pearl—all these gathered round and sank in various attitudes of marked prostration into garden chairs. But the hero from the Bungay Marshes and the thickest person from Paris were nowhere to be seen.

"Where are Mr. Bush and Mr. Ingerstall?" said Mrs. Verulam, looking round.

"I can't imagine," said Mr. Rodney peacefully, as Frederick placed the magnificent grapes from Mitching Dean upon one of the little tables near a rose-bush.

"I dare say Mr. Bush is on a roundabout," said the Duchess. "You say he is fond of being rustic, Mrs. Verulam?"

"Yes; but not in that way, I hope."

"It all goes together, love of the country and a passion for riding wooden horses painted yellow to the sound of comic songs. Depend upon it, Mr. Bush is on a roundabout."

Mrs. Verulam began to look very anxious.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, turning towards Mr. Rodney, "I do hope—Mr. Rodney, don't you think, perhaps—"

Now, Mr. Rodney, beneath all his breeding, was human. He did n't know it, but he was, and upon this occasion he revealed the fact.

He was at this moment, when Mrs. Verulam addressed him, very busily engaged in being happy, and he was determined not to be interrupted in this activity. His tired limbs were caressed by a charming chair, into which he fitted quite perfectly. A soft breeze played about his carefully-parted hair. His eyes were dazzled by the beautiful grapes grown in his own hot-houses, and his heart was cradled in the arms of success. Dreamlike he felt, softly rapturous, as the tired but triumphant gladiator. The desperate past, haunted by Lady Sage, lay behind him; tea, sugar, bread-and-butter, a future tenderly bright, lay before. And should he allow even the woman whom he loved to send him forth again to those arid stretches of dusty landscape, there to quest among the perspiring vulgar for a great rustic bumpkin astride an orange or blue horse, revolving furiously in

the heat to the sound of the music of the lower spheres? No, no. Rather annihilation.

Under the stress of this definite determination, therefore, he said with unusual firmness:

"If Mr. Bush is fond of horse-exercise, I certainly think he should be permitted to enjoy it in all freedom. Probably it is his custom to ride on a roundabout every day. Dear me, tea is very refreshing on these occasions!"

Mrs. Verulam was checkmated. She had never seen Mr. Rodney so masterful before.

"There's a great deal of knack in sitting a wooden horse," said the Duke. "Some people can never acquire it. I knew a very excellent clergyman who was thrown three times running by a deal cob which his cook rode perfectly at the very first try."

"You ought always to give a horse of that material his head," said Miss Bindler, taking out a hunting-flask and pouring something yellow into her tea. "If you try to hold him in you're done. Had a good day?" she added to Mr. Rodney.

"Perfect!" said that gentleman celestially—"quite, quite perfect!"

"What, after backing Cubicle?"

"Absolutely perfect!"

"How much did you clear on all the results?"

"Clear?"

"Yes—pouch."

"Pouch?" said Mr. Rodney, as in a happy dream—"pouch?"

"Did you have anything on Lambton and Try Your Luck? Did you go for Mulligatawney?"

"No, no; I did n't go for Mulligatawney."

"Well, then, I'm—I do n't see how you had a good

day," said Miss Bindler, giving him up and turning again to the Duke.

"Do you like Ascot, Mr. Van Adam?" said the Lady Pearl, with unusual vivacity.

"It's heavenly," cried Chloe; "it's like a dream."

"Have you nothing of the kind in America?"

"How can we, when we have no aristocracy? Oh, I should like to make it my life's mission to create a grand American aristocracy, with grades, a Debrett, and everything complete. I would travel, I would hold meetings, I would stir up the splendid class feeling that makes England what it is, I would leave no stone unturned, I would begin by getting baronets for my dear native land—they should be the thin edge of the wedge, and everything else would follow."

Her cheeks flushed with enthusiasm, and her eyes sparkled as she unbuttoned her frock coat and flung it open with the gesture of a born orator. The Lady Pearl caught the infection of the missionary spirit.

"Mr. Van Adam," she said, "you should have lived in the olden days. You should have led Crusaders."

"To Burke instead of battle, an army to armorial bearings. Oh!"

She drank her tea in a soft frenzy, which went straight to the heart of the Lady Pearl.

The Duchess, who had observed these noble raptures with satisfaction, looked narrowly at Mrs. Verulam.

"Is Mr. Van Adam to be much longer with you?" she asked.

"I am afraid not in London," said Mrs. Verulam. "But we may go over to Paris together in a week or two."

"Indeed!" said her Grace, flushing with respectable fury—"indeed!"

"Or on the Continent," continued Mrs. Verulam,

with pretty malice, as she thought of the faithful Mariner's midnight remarks.

Her Grace heaved, and Mr. Rodney woke suddenly from his dreams, and spilt some tea over his boots. Was Mrs. Verulam mad? For a moment he dreaded that the Duchess would lose her head and make a scene, for the famous features became enlarged with passion. Her Grace's form was agitated like an enormous flower in a strong wind, and she opened her capacious mouth as if to allow egress to a stream of eloquent remarks of an opprobrious nature.

But, unfortunately, her curses were lost to an inquiring world, for at this moment Mr. Bush and Mr. Ingerstall emerged from the palace and came towards the group on the lawn with a demeanour which attracted the attention of all. The artist looked wildly hilarious. His enormous spectacles were dimmed with tears of laughter, and his frantic bow-tie streamed abroad in a manner suggestive of unbridled license. Mr. Bush's gigantic countenance, on the other hand, was marked by its usual solid gravity. But the hat from Windsor perched on the side of his head like a wounded bird, battered and forlorn; his clothes seemed to have been hurriedly put on during the active progress of an earthquake; one or two buttons had burst off his boots, and he carried in his hands what appeared, at a distance, to be a large number of cannon-balls, but as he approached resolved themselves into various cocoanuts, such as grow so plentifully in all places where the sinews of Great Britain assemble to have a good time. All eyes were now riveted upon these nuts, two or three of which Mr. Bush let drop on Mr. Rodney's toes as he gained the tea-table. Miss Bindler was the first to break the awed silence which reigned beneath the cedar-tree.

"Been betting in kind?" she said to Mr. Bush. "Taking the odds in fruit? Not a bad idea, if you're keen on it. I should n't mind having a bit on Kiss Me to-morrow—say in gooseberries."

Mr. Bush sat down in silence in a wicker chair and nursed his nuts, while Mr. Rodney, with an approach to violence, kicked away that portion of the winnings which had bruised his delicate feet.

"I would give one year—yes, one whole year—of my caricaturing life," shrieked Mr. Ingerstall, "to take Mr. Bush round the side-shows of Montmartre. How he would appreciate their subtle beauty! He has the artistic sense; he understands the exquisite poetry of vulgarity, the inwardness of the cocoanut-shy, the extraordinary elements of the picturesque which appear in the staring face of Madame Aunt Sally, open-mouthed to receive the provender shot at her by Hodge and Harriet. He knows well the bizarre and beautiful effect upon the nervous system of that strange combination of the arts of music and motion—the roundabout! He—"

"The roundabout?" interrupted the Duchess. "Did n't I say so?"

"You've been riding?" said the Duke to Mr. Bush. "Good exercise—good for the liver! good for the muscles! Did you get a decent horse?"

Mr. Bush burst forth into a loud guffaw.

"Splendid animal!" cried Mr. Ingerstall. "I rode a pink, he a delicate—a really very delicate—apple-green, with sulphur-coloured spots. The music was that extremely pathetic composition: 'Write Me a Letter from Home.' I should have preferred 'Quand les Amoureux s'en Vont Deux par Deux;'" still, the other really did very well. After dismounting—Bush was.

thrown, by the way—we spent half an hour in a tent with the bottle imp. Paris would like it. And then we passed on to the two-faced lady, ending up with a cocoa-nut shy, which Whistler would love to paint. I really never enjoyed an Ascot so much—never!”

He swallowed a cup of tea as a Soudanese miracle-worker swallows an impromptu bonfire, and leaned back, extending his short legs towards the west, as if in compliment to the approaching sunset. Mrs. Verulam looked with glistening approval at Mr. Bush.

“How original you are,” she murmured; “and how bravely simple!” She turned to the house-party. “Should we not all learn to find pleasure in—in what Nature provides for us,” she exclaimed, “instead of creating artificial amusements to—to titillate our baser appetites?”

“Does Nature provide apple-green animals with sulphur-coloured spots?” asked Chloe innocently, stroking the place where she was supposed to shave, meditatively with her forefinger.

“Nature,” said Mr. Rodney, in a voice that quivered and was hoarse with horror—“Nature is—is really scarcely decent.”

Mrs. Verulam’s approval of Mr. Bush’s abominable and Neronic orgy shook him to the soul. That she should praise bottle imps, two-faced females, and speak of the royal Enclosure as ministering to our baser appetites! Even the Mitching Dean grapes lost their colour, their peculiar sweetness, for the moment.

“And all the better for that,” began the Duke, in his most St. John’s Wood manner.

“Lady Drake,” said Mrs. Verulam, a little hastily, “have you seen the fish-pond? I believe it is lovely;

and I know how fond you are of fish-ponds. I wonder if the Duke—"

The hint was sufficient. Lady Drake immediately began to worry the Duke, and the situation was saved.

All the party were now in that condition of physical refreshment which leads human beings to think complacently of gentle movement. They rustled like leaves in a forest, and this rustling was a preliminary to a general uprising. Lady Drake carried off the Duke as the chariot and horses carried off Elijah. The Duchess, under the stress of some sudden mental prompting, swooped in a dignified manner upon Chloe. Mr. Bush composed himself to rest with a cake in each hand. Lady Pearl, Miss Bindler, and Mr. Ingerstall formed a somewhat unsympathetic trio, and trundled towards an adjoining orchid-house; and Mr. Rodney, still trembling and horror-stricken, strolled tragically forward with Mrs. Verulam into the Bun Emperor's rose garden, Number 4. (All the rose gardens were numbered at Ribton Marches.)

Mrs. Verulam was glowing, Mr. Rodney glowering. The former was full of James Bush, the latter of intense and shrinking disgust. These feelings rather clashed in the soft light which now began to fall over the scented garden.

"The true path of pleasure," began Mrs. Verulam in an inward voice, "lies where we never seek it—far, far away from the shams and the conventions with which we surround our little lives. Oh! why—why are we so blind?"

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Rodney; "I can see perfectly well, and I must really venture to say that—"

"You think you can see," interrupted Mrs. Verulam in soft rebuke, "as the blind man does when he mistakes men for trees walking."

"I never made any such mistake," Mr. Rodney rejoined with unwonted vivacity; "I never in my life supposed that I saw a tree taking active exercise. Really, I must protest—"

"Your very protestations prove your sad condition, and the sad condition of all in our world," Mrs. Verulam went on intellectually; "but I, at least, will be blind no longer. Mr. Bush shall open my eyes."

Mr. Rodney gasped. He felt that the time had indeed arrived for him to speak out.

"Mrs. Verulam," he began—"Mrs. Verulam, I must—forgive me."

"For what?" she sweetly queried.

"I must, indeed—I must speak. Are you—can you be aware of what society will inevitably say if you permit a—a man—of Mr. Bush's—er—appearance, or, indeed, any man to open your eyes? Society will not permit these—these unwarrantable—forgive me—unwarrantable liberties. The line will be drawn—it will, indeed. Let me implore you to realize this before it is too late—let me implore you, if I have any influence!"

He quite broke down, and trod on a valuable verbena.

"Society calls crimes virtuous, and virtues criminal," said Mrs. Verulam.

"Oh, pardon me—pardon me!" he babbled.

"Yes, it does. True virtue is simple, frank, unashamed."

"Ah, ah! unashamed in the—the very shocking way of Eve before her very desirable—if I may say so—fall," cried Mr. Rodney.

"Mr. Bush stands to me for virtue," added Mrs. Verulam irrepressibly.

This was too much for Mr. Rodney. He stood stock still like one struck with paralysis.

"Mr. Bush!" he stuttered. "Then what does Mr. Van Adam stand for?"

"Chloe—er—Mr. Van Adam! What has he to say to the matter?"

"Oh, Mrs. Verulam, everything, everything! It is time, I see—it is time—I must—I ought to tell you the truth."

"Please do so."

He hesitated for a moment, passing a cambric pocket-handkerchief across his pallid lips, then he said:

"At least, let us come into the shade."

That "at least" gave the man's soul in a couple of words. He felt all the terror of his coming revelation. Mrs. Verulam assented, and they moved to a little grove of shrubs, monkey-trees, and other indigenous plants which grew near by. Here the sun was less ardent; here a soft breeze blew kindly; but here also something else occurred which gave Mr. Rodney time to compose himself a little. As they came into this seclusion, artificially induced by the genius of the Bun Emperor's landscape gardener, an unexpected vision burst upon their eyes. Beneath a monkey-tree of superb proportions, in a hammock suspended between substantial supports, they beheld Mr. Harrison laid out at full length smoking a large cigar in semi-unconsciousness, while the faithful Marriner alternately rocked him gently the while she hummed a crooning lullaby, and stroked the surface of his bald and dome-like head with the palm of her delicate hand. For a moment the charm of this quite unexpected fairy scene so enervated Mrs. Verulam and Mr. Rodney that they remained motionless in contemplation of it. The rhythmically rocking groom of the chambers, the shrill and monotonous cry of the lady's-maid in the sultry summer evening, created a sort of magical, unreal

atmosphere. The slanting light, too, caught the bald head, and transformed it almost into the likeness of a globe of some glittering material. And as it swayed solemnly to-and-fro like the pendulum of a clock, in obedience to the motion given by the faithful Marriner to the hammock, it laid a hypnotic spell upon these two who gazed at it.

“Sleep, oh, sleep! it’s never too late for that;
Sleep, yes, sleep, with your head upon the mat!
For the workman’s train is passing nigh,
And the early milkman gives his cry,
You’ll be taken to quod when the copper comes by,
So sleep, yes, slee-cep!”

sang Marriner tenderly, and Mr. Harrison did all he knew to be obedient. He dozed, and was rapidly proceeding towards the most profound condition of slumber, when Mr. Rodney, whether by accident or design, coughed rather loudly. At this unearthly sound, Marriner, who was half dreaming while she sang, was greatly startled. Surprise released her limbs from her control, and the arm that rocked the hammock shot suddenly forward with such violence that Mr. Harrison was ejected from his delicious position, and, executing a clever turn in the air, alighted at full length upon the ground, face downwards, with a noise that was surprising. Mrs. Verulam looked reproachfully at Mr. Rodney, while the faithful Marriner fell on her knees beside the groom of the chambers.

“Oh, he’s dead!” she wailed. And she, too, turned on Mr. Rodney. “You’ve killed him, sir!” she shrieked, respectfully.

“I am very sorry,” said Mr. Rodney. “I did n’t intend.”

At this juncture Mr. Harrison lifted his face from the

earth, sat round so that they could see his indignant expression, heaved himself forward upon his knees, and then, planting his hands, palms downwards, upon the ground, and using them as a lever, straightened his legs very deliberately, and was presently successful in standing upon his feet. He made no remark after this elaborate acrobatic performance, but gave Mr. Rodney a markedly malignant glance, and then shambled away among the monkey-trees till he was lost to sight. Marriner, meanwhile, stood by looking downcast.

"I am sure, ma'am," she said at length, "if I had surmised that the races would conclude so early, I should never—"

"You can go, Marriner," said Mrs. Verulam. "I had no idea you had such a pretty singing voice."

"If I might speak, ma'am."

"Certainly, Marriner."

"I learnt from going to hear Madame Albani, ma'am, at the Albert Hall on my evenings out."

And she slipped away, carrying with her an atmosphere of curious cultivation.

"That man is very offensive, very!" said Mr. Rodney, with feeling.

"For being thrown out of the hammock?"

"He had no business to be in it. Servants should not go about sleeping all over the place in their masters' gardens. This sort of thing is never permitted at Mitching Dean."

"Oh, I like to see the humble enjoying themselves," said Mrs. Verulam, with vague beneficence, a little forgetful, perhaps, of Mr. Harrison's natural self-importance and late severe accident. "But what were you going to say to me?"

And she sat down on a rustic seat made from the

trunk of a tree all knobs. Mr. Rodney perched in a distressed manner upon one of the branches, and said dolefully:

"Really, all this—this tumult has quite put it out of my head."

"You wished, I think, to tell me the truth about something," said Mrs. Verulam, in an assisting voice.

"I believe so—yes, I thought it my duty," began Mr. Rodney.

He was now in cold blood, owing to the late hammock episode, and found it difficult to say what would have been easy enough when he was in what was for him a passion. He ran one long hand over a dozen or so of the knobs, feeling them like a phrenologist.

"I really considered it my bounden duty," he continued, very plaintively, with an accent on the "bounden."

"Yes?" said Mrs. Verulam, with calm innocence.

"To—to tell you what—what the world is saying," said Mr. Rodney, in marked discomfort.

"About me?"

"About you and—and Mr. Van Adam."

"Indeed! What should it say?"

"Very, very dreadful things!" said Mr. Rodney, almost blushing.

"Dear me! How very absurd!" she cried lightly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Rodney, with more courage. "It is not absurd." He thought of his hours of furtive precaution in the royal Enclosure. "Far, far from it! I hardly like to tell you—"

"Please do."

"Well," commenced Mr. Rodney, with the manner of a budding anarchist throwing his first bomb, "Lady Sage and one or two others—leading la—" he thought of the *Era*, and hastily substituted "leading women,

take the matter so seriously that—oh, my dear Mrs. Verulam, do pray forgive me! they are actually intending not to see you—when you are there, you understand?”

“They want to cut me, in fact?”

Mr. Rodney really blushed and was silent, giving consent.

“If they do so, what will follow?” said Mrs. Verulam, with a great deal of apparent composure.

“Follow!” cried Mr. Rodney, with all his force and eloquence. “Death!”

“Indeed! Is Lady Sage to be the corpse, or am I?”

“You!” he exclaimed. “Oh, Mrs. Verulam, think of it! Social death, ostracism, exile—er—er—” He tried to think of further words bearing a similar significance, but failing, added: “Do you realize my meaning? Do you see the gulf that is opening out beneath your very feet?”

“Indeed I do, with very great pleasure.”

“Pleasure!”

The word rose from him in a male scream.

“Who is being murdered?” remarked the deep voice of the Duchess, who at this instant became visible threading her way through the shrubs with Chloe at her side.

CHAPTER XI

MR. HARRISON'S NIGHT-WATCH

From this terrible moment despair began to grip Mr. Rodney, and the worst of it was, that besides being in despair, he was in confusion. He now fully recognised that Mrs. Verulam was suffering under a "possession," as he called it to himself. What he could not decide was, which of those two demons, Huskinson Van Adam and James Bush, it was who possessed her with demoniacal influence. Lady Sage was about to cut Mrs. Verulam because of Mr. Van Adam. Society would certainly follow Lady Sage's lead on the same account. But Mr. Rodney's penetration had almost convinced him that the man from Bungay was, in truth, the Svangali to this Trilby. It was surely his enormous shadow in which Mrs. Verulam now walked. It was his fatal rusticity which she envied, his sheep-washing, bee-swallowing, cabbage-digging, pea-podding existence she aimed at. This was so. But then, why should she compromise herself with this divorced Huskinson? Why should she lead him about whithersoever she went? Poor Mr. Rodney began "turning, turning in mazes of heat and sound." He yearned for the informing letter from Lord Bernard Roche which tarried so long upon the way. Nevertheless, when it came, this letter only increased the darkness in which events moved—at the first.

In fact, all things tended towards complication in and about the palace at this time. And although Mr. Rodney, in the usual manner of men, flattered himself that he alone of all the universe was truly troubled in spirit, he was entirely mistaken. Mrs. Verulam was secretly exercised at the apparent success which was about to crown her endeavours to leave the *milieu* in which Heaven had placed her. The Lady Pearl was, or imagined herself to be, swept by the mysterious tremors of a budding affection. The Duchess was in a simmering state of fury against her hostess, and of match-making anxiety on her daughter's behalf. And before the week was out Chloe was struck by a thunderbolt—metaphorically. At the moment, however, Mr. Rodney was to some extent correct in considering himself the most unhappy person within the precincts of the palace. On this Tuesday night he probably was, as he sat down to dinner, pale, seedy, and bemuddled.

Her Grace was in a certain mental confusion. That afternoon in the shrubbery she had been "sounding" Chloe, as she called it. That is to say, she had been asking Chloe a very large number of extremely leading questions in a very determined bass voice. Chloe had been obliged to hear herself characterized as a very rascally woman, and to receive to herself the flood of pity intended for her ex-husband. She had also been informed that the victim of one unfortunate marriage should instantly seek for happiness in another and more judicious union. And she had learned the catalogue of the Lady Pearl's perfections. According to her mother, the Lady Pearl's only fault was a slight tendency to hereditary gout, and that, as her Grace very justly observed, was glorified in a manner by the fact that it was distinctly filial.

"The Duke has always been a victim to it, Mr. Van Adam," she exclaimed, with undoubted force, "and Pearl has been accustomed from a child to look up to her father as to a being almost sacred."

The apparent deduction to be drawn from this sound reasoning was, that if from childhood you look up to a sacred being—who has the gout—you will be rewarded by receiving the sacred being's complaint; a somewhat unsatisfactory state of things, which, however, has this advantage, that it places you in the excellent position of being an undoubted martyr. Chloe had done her best not to give any encouragement to the determined hopes of the Duchess, but her gay delight in titles made it so difficult for her to resist the seductions of one so venerable as the title of Southborough, that she left upon her Grace an impression that there was nothing in the Verulam business on her side. This made the Duchess highly generous to Chloe, but hardly blunted her anger against Mrs. Verulam, who was, no doubt, deliberately trying to snatch the American away from the Lady Pearl. The Duchess's spirit was up in arms against such paltry kleptomania. She was resolved to protect the supposed orange-grower from such wicked designs; and on Tuesday night her bosom swelled with mingled determination and enmity as she solaced her spirit with mayonnaise and '84 champagne.

Mrs. Verulam paid but little heed to the Duchess's physical indications of mental excitement. To-night she was engrossed with the desire to show James Bush, her hero, off to this world ignorant of what a real man can be. So far, Mr. Bush had borne himself bravely and naturally on the whole, the telescope episode alone excepted. His treatment of Ascot had been specially fine and noble. It is not every man, indeed, who has the courage to forsake

the gaieties of a box close to the winning-post, the glories of the lawn, for the retired tent of the two-faced lady and the painted charms of the roundabout. It is not every man who has the intrepidity to give the ring the cold shoulder, and the beautiful simplicity to return to a palace at eventide, laden, like the spies of old, with the ripe fruits of Mother Earth—the cocoanuts of a Land of Promise. Already James Bush had betrayed the grandeur of his nature, but Mrs. Verulam was anxious to display every side of this character, so multifarious in beauty. And accordingly, that night after dinner, when the men came into the hall, she began to address herself rather pointedly to her hero, while Mr. Rodney sat writhing with jealousy in the immediate neighbourhood.

"Duchess," she said, "Mr. Bush, you must know, is full of maxims."

"Dear me! Is he related to a copy-book?" replied her Grace, lethargically.

"Oh, no! Not maxims of that kind. His are founded upon observation of life and knowledge of the world—that is to say, of the beautiful earth. Are n't they, Mr. Bush?"

"There 's nought like pea-poddin'," replied that gentleman, judicially.

Attired in a dress suit of strikingly original conception and cut, some sizes too small for his large frame, but well adapted to emphasize its enormous bulk, he was spread out upon a huge settee in an attitude of brilliant abandonment. The Duke was beside him, and Lady Drake close by. Mrs. Verulam saw that everybody, reduced to a readiness for contemplative silence by much dinner, was listening with apparent attention. A bright resolve came to her. She would induce James

Bush to show fully his true, grand self, to illuminate them all with the light that flamed from a great soul.

"Yes?" she said, encouragingly. "Yes?"

Thus adjured, Mr. Bush added, after a moment of deep thought:

"Look after the sheep and the sheep 'll look after you!"

"It sounds like 'Diana of the Crossways,'" piped Lady Drake, in her acidulated manner.

"I do n't know that I should care to be looked after by a sheep," said Miss Bindler, practically, as she lit a small cigar. "I do n't consider a sheep to be an efficient animal."

"They want a deal of mindin'," said Mr. Bush—"a deal of mindin'."

"Because they have no minds," said the Duke, yawning as a mask yawns in a pantomime. "The same remark applies to the same class of the human animal. Ask the Government of the day if it is n't so."

But Mrs. Verulam had no intention of permitting her hero to be involved in a commonplace political discussion.

"Oh, I feel sure that even a sheep is deeply, deeply interesting, if properly studied," she said.

"Ay," said Mr. Bush.

"It 's what we bring to a thing, is n't it?" she added, greatly encouraged.

"What would you bring to a sheep?" said Miss Bindler.

"Swedes," said Mr. Bush, before Mrs. Verulam could make reply.

All this time Mr. Rodney sat petrified, rendered inert and almost idiotic by the turn the conversation was taking. What such remarks meant he scarcely knew; but

they seemed to him highly improper and indelicate. He wondered that ladies could hear them without a blush! That Mrs. Verulam could deliberately lead up to them was terrible to him.

Mr. Bush was, by this time, growing expansive, aware that the conversation which was now in progress depended mainly upon him.

"Swedes to a sheep, the stick to a woman," he ejaculated, with a rumbling chuckle.

The Duke looked delighted with this philosophy, which rather overwhelmed Mrs. Verulam for the moment.

"You believe in the rights of man, Mr. Bush?" he said. "Eh? eh? You stick to the old dispensation, the walnut-tree cure? What? what?"

"I should be very sorry for the man who laid a finger upon me, very!" said Miss Bindler, calmly, but with emphasis.

"Oh, Mr. Bush is only joking," said Mrs. Verulam hastily; while Mr. Rodney lay back, closed his eyes, and permitted his entire face to become a mass of wrinkles.

"A great many young men would be the better for a good whipping nowadays," bellowed the Duchess from her sofa. "I would begin by applying the bastinado to those who refuse to answer invitations. Susan Barrington asked three hundred and two dancing men to her ball the other night. Thirty-two answered, and thirty turned up. The ball was a fiasco."

This restorative brought Mr. Rodney to. Lady Barrington was, of course, one of his oldest and most valued friends.

"The question of answering invitations is certainly one of vital importance," he began with soft animation. "For my part, as a citizen of the world, I cannot help thinking that—"

"Never give a bullock sulphur," said Mr. Bush, now fully roused to epigram—"never do it, or you'll repent of it."

Mr. Rodney was seldom in his life nearer making use of the foolish and tiresome monosyllable "damn."

"And how about the bullock?" said his Grace, assuming the helplessness of his appearance, and laying aside the usual grimacing geniality of his manner. "If the bullock has the sulphur, and you repent of it, what will be the exact mental condition of the swallower?"

All now prepared to hang upon the man from Bungay's words—all, that is, except Mr. Rodney, who again closed his eyes, and Mr. Ingerstall, whose silence is accounted for by the fact that all this time he was sitting in a corner and drawing an elaborate caricature of the paragon. But Mr. Bush was not of a temper to give satisfaction to impertinent questioning; he suddenly turned sulky, and, after muttering heavily, "Let the bullock alone, and the bullock'll let you alone!" he appeared to fall asleep. Mrs. Verulam was very angry with the Duke for thus spoiling a delightful evening, so she smiled with extraordinary sweetness, and set Lady Drake at him, while she devoted herself to the Duchess. The latter, lethargic though she was, became suspicious of her hostess's extraordinary affability, and of the perfectly free hand which the Van Adam was being allowed with the Lady Pearl. She could not realize that Mrs. Verulam's sudden access of seraphic sweetness was occasioned solely by the fury of the woman who sees her hero balked by a blunderer in the very hour of his triumph. It therefore suddenly occurred to her Grace that possibly Mrs. Verulam and Mr. Van Adam were trying to blind her and the world, that possibly they were even using her precious, her gouty and innocent Pearl after the

manner of a stalking horse. Under the seizure of these black surmisings, she replied to Mrs. Verulam's blandishments rather plethorically, and her eyes became enormously prominent, as was their custom in moments of acute mental strain. Mrs. Verulam was at first too angry to notice the rather abrupt assumption by the Duchess of a private inquiry agent's manner when in converse with a suspected party, but possibly she would have been forced to observe it had not Mr. Ingerstall suddenly shot forward from his corner, obtruded his squat form between them, and hissed, in a pattering whisper:

"He's asleep, is n't he?"

"Asleep! Who?" cried the Duchess, startled.

For Mr. Ingerstall's proceedings were intensely rapid, and were always carried forward with a masterly disregard of other people's feelings. Mr. Ingerstall, with incomparable agility, indicated Mr. James Bush, who, at that moment emitted a reassuring snore.

"Yes, he is. I've got something to show you."

"Oh, what is it?" said Mrs. Verulam, hastily withdrawing her skirts—"what is it? Is it alive?"

"In Paris I flatter myself they would say it was," he gabbled under his breath. "For in Paris art is alive, breathing, vitalized, full-blooded, fearless, sensuous, daring. God knows what they would call it in England! Look at it!"

He popped out his hand under their noses, holding a sheet of paper, upon which was drawn a thing as fat as a pig and as hairy as a porcupine, lying on its back, with feet, as big as houses, pointing to the sky, while from its mouth, wide as a witches' cavern, floated on a scroll the following legend: "Never give a bullock sulphur!"

"It's very like," remarked her Grace, after a

moment of contemplation—"very true to life. Do n't you think so, Mrs. Verulam?"

"I don't know what it is," said Mrs. Verulam, in great perplexity; "is it meant for a bullock, then—after the sulphur?"

Mr. Ingerstall's monkey-like face was suffused with indignant blood.

"A bullock!" he cried poignantly. "It 's Bush!"

The shrillness of the exclamation thus wrung from outraged genius not only made all the awake members of the house-party jump, but even pierced through the hide of the paragon's tough sleep.

"Bush!" he said, sitting up with a snort; "who 's a-wantin' me? Is it time to begin hoein'?"

There was a dead silence. Nobody grasped the inner meaning of the final query.

"Who wants Bush?" continued the owner of the name. "Eh?"

"I do!" suddenly shrieked Mr. Ingerstall, protruding his caricature beneath the eyes of Mrs. Verulam's ideal. "I do! I ask you, I ask you confidently, is that a bullock or is it you?" And, thrusting the paper between Mr. Bush's fists, Mr. Ingerstall flung himself back in his chair, puffing with all the generous indignation of insulted and misunderstood genius.

The Duke, with very great difficulty, restrained himself from a nasal "Joey!" succeeded by the time-honoured "Here we are again!" which is the proper prelude to jokes of the more practical order. Mr. Rodney opened his eyes and sat a little forward on his chair; and Mrs. Verulam, speechless with horror at Mr. Ingerstall's named outrage, gazed steadily at the Turkey carpet of the hall, and wished it might engulf her.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bush stared upon the work of art with his goggling red-brown eyes and said nothing.

"Is it, I ask you once more with perfect confidence," snapped Mr. Ingerstall, with rising excitement—"is it a bullock or is it you? Come, come!" And he slapped his fat hands with great violence down on his knees.

"Me!" mumbled Mr. Bush at length. "Me! What d' yer mean?"

"What I say, Heaven preserve us all! What I say!" screamed the artist.

Mr. Bush looked from the outrage to its committer, and appeared to be measuring the latter with his eye. Having done so, and apparently found the result to be satisfactory as compared with his own measurements, he remarked: "This me!" and made a movement suddenly as though he were about to get up.

"Go it!" said Miss Bindler sharply, planting a single eyeglass rapidly under her left eyebrow, and screwing up her cheek. "Time!"

Mrs. Verulam became breathless with excitement. Her gaze was fastened upon her hero. A thrill ran through the house-party. With his huge hands upon the arms of the chair, Mr. Bush rolled forward towards Mr. Ingerstall and became brilliant.

"I ask *you* with confidence," he brawled slowly, "is this here a bullock, or is it me?"

Mr. Ingerstall looked at him for an instant, and then cried like something whipped:

"It's a bullock!"

Mr. Bush glanced around with the air of a successful prize-fighter about to retire from the ring.

"That's all right!" he ejaculated, and leaning back he fell asleep again.

This incident, trifling enough in itself, was by no means trifling in its consequence. For it turned the scale in which Mrs. Verulam's heart was trembling. Down came the scale on Mr. Bush's side. The feminine confidence that had been ever so slightly shaken by the hero's beast-like retreat before the telescope of the Bun Emperor was now entirely restored. That retreat had been a lapse from the grave custom of a noble life, not an illustration from the existence of a coward. Mrs. Verulam knew from this moment that she was worshipping before a shrine that was really sacred, a shrine that deserved, that had earned, its incense. As the conqueror fell so calmly and confidently asleep, reposing, as it were, upon the very field of battle, she looked across at Chloe with eyes that claimed her tender sympathy. The Duchess intercepted the look, and darted indignant inquiry upon Mrs. Verulam, while Chloe, observing the accident, softly smiled with a pretty mischief. Unfortunately, her Grace, driven by dread suspicion, turned sharply towards Chloe, and surprised the smile at its climax. The Duchess swelled with fury. She now felt certain that she was being tricked by this abandoned couple. Her Pearl was being made a cat's-paw. Old Martha Sage was right. For a moment she sat shaking like a jelly in her arm-chair. Then she rose up, uttered a general "good-night," that sounded like notes from a bass tuba, called the Lady Pearl, and swept in a distinctly frenzied manner up the staircase to bed.

"The Duchess is very quick on her pins," said Miss Bindler, looking after her. "Did she ever enter for a walking race?" she added to the Duke.

"Not since I married her," his Grace replied.

"She should; she'd stand a ten-to-one chance. Well, I'll be off to my loose-box, too, I think."

There was a general movement, through which Mr. Bush calmly slept. Lady Drake was just at the foot of the staircase when her sharp little eye was attracted by a pillar, something like a tiny Cleopatra's needle in shape, but bristling with handles and small knobs and buttons, which stood in a far corner of the hall.

"What's that?" she asked, in her thin voice that was like a squeeze of lemon-juice, pointing with her skeleton finger towards it.

"Oh," said the Duke, "that's one of Lite's patent automatic machines, full of sweets, chocolates, and horrors of that kind. Put in a penny, and out bursts a slab of butter-scotch or a stick of peppermint."

"Dear me!" said Lady Drake, meditatively, and almost languishingly; "what an excellent idea!"

And she walked slowly upstairs, occasionally turning her virtuous-looking head to shoot an affectionate glance at the machine. Miss Bindler had already vanished. Of all the women—recognised as such—only Mrs. Verulam still lingered, gazing at the majestic form of her sleeping hero. She longed to see it clothed in armour, helmeted, with sword by its side, and all the emblems of ancient chivalry and valour, resting like a Crusader, only alive and on a sofa instead of on a tomb. She breathed a gentle sigh, and suddenly became aware that Mr. Rodney was observing her with a white glare of scrutiny over the top of the *World*, the last number of which had arrived at the palace that afternoon. She blushed and vanished. Mr. Rodney ground his teeth, a proceeding which till that moment he had always regarded as the special prerogative of the lower classes. Chloe heard the grating sound. She was just resisting the urging of the Duke to "stay and have a smoke, and hear some damned good stories!"

"Can 't to-night," she answered, with a successful effort at young mannishness; "infernally tired!"

She forced a prodigious yawn and moved towards the staircase. Mr. Rodney, meanwhile, was desperately reading the paper. Just as Chloe had got her foot on the first stair, she heard him utter an exclamation of surprise.

"Van Adam!" he said.

"Yes."

"Here 's another paragraph about you—oh, no, your brother. Did you expect him?"

Chloe stopped dead.

"My brother?"

"Yes; look here."

Mr. Rodney rose and, softly approaching, put the paper into her hands.

"Mr. Van Adam, a brother, we believe, of Mr. Huskinson Van Adam, who is now staying with Mrs. Verulam at Ribton Marches, Sunninghill, has just arrived from America on board the *Arethusa*. His destination is believed to be also Ascot. The race week promises to be the most successful on record."

Chloe nearly let the paper fall.

"Dear me!" she said slowly, and looking steadily at Mr. Rodney. "Dear me! I had no idea that—that"—she searched her mind hurriedly for an appropriate American name—"that Vancouver intended to come over this summer."

"I hope we shall see something of him," said Mr. Rodney, with a slightly forced politeness.

"Oh, thanks! he 's—Vancouver 's rather shy—retiring. Well, good-night."

She made off, taking boyish strides towards the friendly shelter of her bedroom.

That night she was almost as much awake as the average owl is in the dark and silent hours. Indeed, she was seldom in bed, being for the most part engaged in searching the advertisement columns of the *Daily Telegraph* for the names of private inquiry agents who, for a consideration, were ready to "watch" any living person from the nineteenth century until the Judgment Day. Having compiled a full list of these worthy persons, towards dawn Chloe wrote to the larger number of them, expressing an ardent desire to have the newly-arrived Vancouver shadowed. Just as she was directing the last of these missives, her attention was attracted by a sound as of a loud and heavy voice at some distance, uttering an enormous quantity of slow remarks with pauses between them. She listened for some minutes. The sound continued. Chloe was not naturally a nervous woman, but she was a rather curious one, and she began to wonder what on earth could be happening.

She got up from her writing-table and gently opened her bedroom door. The palace was plunged in profound darkness and somewhere, away in the darkness, somebody was apparently delivering a recitation in snatches. Who could it be? And where? Chloe took her candle, and, turning up her trousers instinctively, for fear they would rustle, made softly in the direction of the sound. It chanced that her bedroom was very near the servants' staircase, from which, on Monday morning, Mr. Rodney had heard Mr. Harrison's anxious confidences poured into the distant ear of his imperial master. Chloe knew nothing about this staircase, but, searching for the sound, she presently arrived at a swing-door which opened upon it, and stood on almost the self-same stair as that previously pressed by the feet of the attentive Mr. Rodney. She then heard some-

thing that at first absolutely amazed and confounded her.

When the women of the house-party, among whom we will include Chloe, had gone to bed, the Duke, balked of his attempt to engage Chloe as a listener, fastened on Mr. Ingerstall, and led away that unhappy and seething victim of a Providence which sees fit unevenly to distribute muscular development and size to be smoked over and anecdoted at. Mr. Rodney proceeded to go on grinding his teeth and cursing himself as the most miserable of men, and Mr. James Bush went on reposing. He did not hear the powdered Frederick, with sweetly tinkling sounds, by his left elbow adjust the drink his soul loved upon an oaken table. He did not hear the persistent grating which betokened the supreme mental agony of the admirable owner of Mitching Dean. He was far away in the land where all things are either forgotten or remembered in a manner more fantastic than the trickery of blank oblivion. And in this land he elected to remain until the Duke's last tale was told, Mr. Ingerstall's last recollection of Paris Quartier Latin days was hissed, Mr. Rodney's last groan was hushed. In short, everybody went off to bed, except Mr. Bush, who had a nasty habit of going to sleep anywhere, except in the proper place for such a performance. Even the menials, after watching hopelessly for a while by the reposing warrior, in hopes to see him wake, placed a lighted candle by his side, switched off the electric light, and skedaddled to the luxuriously-furnished attics provided for them by a thoughtful master. When at length Mrs. Verulam's hero woke, he was alone, in almost total darkness. He heaved himself round, spread forth his arms and clasped the cold, smooth sides of a decanter. The object roused an instinct always

latent, when not active, within his heart. Mechanically he took measures to transfer the contents of the decanter to another receptacle, and then, refreshed, he rose, grasped the candle, and made off, a little vaguely, with some fragmentary recollections of bed floating hazily through his mind. Missing the grand staircase, he presently found himself at the foot of another, and was about to ascend, when he heard, as Mr. Rodney had heard, the shrill tinkle of the bell of the Bun Emperor's patent telephone. Mr. Bush paused and scratched his enormous head. The bell rang again. Directing his large eyes towards it, Mr. Bush, who had never before been made known to a telephone, approached his face to it with a view merely of examining it closely, and was suddenly startled by hearing a voice of most extraordinary thinness and spiritualistic quality say, "Are you there? Damn you! are you or are n't you there?"

Mr. Bush paused and endeavoured to reflect, but, failing, again permitted his ear to approach the vehicle, and again heard the same question afflicted with the same and an additional oath. The gentleman from Bungay was not of very susceptible temperament, but this shadowy voice of the night, speaking so genially and so colloquially, rather fascinated him, and, placing his candle upon the floor, he proceeded to listen attentively.

"Damn you! are you there?" continued the voice. "Did I or did I not tell you you was to watch all night, and be at the tube at three o'clock to the moment? Did I tell you or did I not?"

Silence fell. Mr. Bush remained in an attitude of entrancement. Presently once more the tiny voice took up the wondrous tale.

"If you are n't at the tube in another five minutes, to-morrow you shall be turned into the street, as sure

as you re a living man! Into the street you shall go, bag and baggage! Do you hear, you—"

More words of a highly unmentionable character followed, and another but shorter pause, through which Mr. Bush smiled with a solemn appreciation of wide vocabularies. The bell rang violently again.

"— you, go to the tube directly this minute!" resumed the voice. "Go to the tube and answer me, or you 'll repent it to the last minute of your natural life, you will!"

These repeated references to a tube, and to the earnest desire of the voice to receive a reply, at length began to take effect on Mr. Bush. He picked up his candle from the floor and let its light fall on the voice, or rather on the voice's near neighbourhood. A tube started to his eye. He slowly unhooked it, and again listened to the voice, which meanwhile had again rung the bell about five-and-fifty times.

"Are you there? Where are you? Where the — are you? — you, are you, or are n't you there? Why are n't you there? What do you mean by it? Did I or did I not tell you to be there at three o'clock? I say, did I tell you or did I not tell you to be there? You —, did I or did I —"

"No," said Mr. Bush into the tube.

"Oh, you 're there at last, are you?" (More words.)

"I wonder you have the impidence to come. Yes, I do, and Mrs. Lite says similar. She wonders, she says, you have the blasted impidence to come at all after keeping me dancing here for an hour and more. What? Dancing here, I say. I've been dancing here for an hour and more."

"Keep on dancing!" roared Mr. Bush to the tube.

"Keep it up!"

He did not in the least comprehend what the tele-

phone was, or what was happening. All he knew was that a voice was insulting him with a refreshing grossness, and that he seemed able, by means of this tube, to insult it back again. This pleased him very well, and he carefully laid his candlestick down on the floor with a view to thorough ease and equality in the ensuing combat. Then he once more seized the tube, and reiterated, "Dance away, and be —!"

There was a long pause. Apparently the voice, obedient to the command, was engaged in dancing away and being treated according to Mr. Bush's prescription. That gentleman began to be afraid that the game was up, and that he had shown his valour too abruptly, when his ear was again tickled by the reassuring utterance:

"To-morrow I 'll skin you!" (Pause.) "D' you hear what I say?—to-morrow, when you come round with your report, I 'll skin you!"

Mr. Bush scratched his head, trying to invent an appropriate rejoinder to this pleasantry.

"When you come round with the report, skin you I will as sure as you're a living man," tickled the voice once more.

"I shan't come round," said Mr. Bush. "Go to blazes!"

At this rejoinder the voice appeared to become a raving lunatic. It poured forth a stuttering volley of impossible words, some peculiar to Camberwell, others borrowed from a more Whitechapel dialect, and others again that are in ordinary use among the groom race, the able-seaman tribe, and the aborigines of the British army in all parts of the world. Mr. Bush heard them with a relish that was almost voluptuous. He now began to regard the affair as a thundering good joke—the sort of joke that his rustic mind could well appreciate,

and his desire was to urge the voice on to further efforts in the fine profession of blasphemy. He therefore applied himself heartily to the tube just as Chloe appeared, walking gingerly at the summit of the staircase. Seeing the flicker of Mr. Bush's candle, she extinguished hers exactly as he bawled this varied monologue:

"Keep your hair on! There's nought like pea-pod-din'. Look after the sheep, and the sheep 'll look after you. Never give a bullock sulphur, or you 'll repent of it. Keep on dancin'. Go to blazes—go!"

Chloe's first idea was that Mr. Bush had gravely exceeded, and that he was now squatting somewhere below her in a basement of the palace, and delivering his soul to some imaginary recipient of such articles. She cautiously descended some steps, and perceived the paragon at the telephone, listening with a rapt attention to the voice's reply to his rural adjuration. It cannot be printed here. In truth, the imperial occupant of the fishing cottage, who supposed himself to be conversing with Mr. Harrison, drew near to apoplectic convulsions with a rapidity which seriously alarmed the Empress.

"How 's yourself?" continued Mr. Bush, making a strong intellectual effort. "Has the dancin' done for yer? Would you like to skin me now? Come on; I'm waitin' to be skinned. Yes, I am; I'm ready for it. Come and skin me—come!"

To Chloe these words were totally inexplicable. To whom this invitation was addressed so cordially she had no idea. She found herself entranced as by the progress of a nightmare, and was just racking her brain to summon a vision of the person who was at the other end of the telephone, when she heard above her a creaking footstep.

This was the groom of the chambers. Poor Mr. Harrison possessed that useful knowledge, the knowledge of which side his bread was buttered. He would almost as soon have died as have lost his post in the palace which, usually so easy and agreeable, was now become so onerous and complicated, therefore he was intent on obeying as many of the Bun Emperor's increasing commands as possible. But Mr. Harrison, being human, was subject to fatigue. Naturally of a lazy habit, his present unwonted exertions were beginning seriously to tell upon him, and he had therefore disregarded his potentate's commands to watch all night, had set an enormous alarm clock to explode punctually at a quarter to three o'clock in the morning, and had then flung himself, fully dressed, upon his feather four-poster to refresh himself with a three-hours' nap. The alarm, he surmised, would enable him to be at the telephone ready with a lie at the appointed hour. Unfortunately, his calculations, excellent in themselves, were vitiated by the malign proceedings of the alarm, which chose to misbehave itself and to remain silent till three-thirty, at which time it made an ejaculation like the last trump. Without glancing at the clock, the trustful groom of the chambers extricated himself from the deep valley in which he had been reposing between two ranges of lofty mountains of heaped-up down, and hastened towards his post, inventing a great number of admirable lies as he went. As he arrived at the top of the stairs, Mr. Bush, now tiring of the joke, restored the tube to its place, and, perceiving that he had wandered into a strange portion of the palace, made slowly off in search of the baronial hall. Chloe, hearing approaching foot-falls above her, crept down after him; and thus it happened that Mr. Harrison, wholly unaware of what had

passed, presently gained the telephone, and, smiling to himself at the ingenious fable of his night-watch which he was about to unfold, stood listening for the Emperor's ring. It came with violence, and, lending ear, Mr. Harrison found himself welcomed with:

"If you do n't come round, as sure as you 're a living man, at the end of the week I'll tear you limb from limb, I will."

"Sir!" cried Mr. Harrison into the tube, with an accent of unmitigated terror.

"If you do n't come round, I say, to-morrow by eight, at the end of the week I'll tear you limb from limb."

"But, sir, I shall be round, depend upon me; I shall be there to the moment. Oh, most decidedly—without fail I will be round; rely on me."

"Oh, you 're coming, are you?"

"Oh, most certainly, sir! Could you doubt it?"

"Then as soon as you come I'll skin you."

"Sir!"

"At eight I'll skin you—to the moment I will; and Mrs. Lite says exactly similar."

On hearing this appalling decision as to his future fate, Mr. Harrison's fortitude gave way. His knees knocked together like castanets. He dropped the tube, and, uttering a dismal wail, he turned and slowly fled, scarcely knowing whither, though, as a matter of fact, his feet mechanically carried him towards that hall in which he had so often held sweet converse with the beloved lady and gentleman who were now so anxious to possess his hide. Still reiterating his fearful wail, like some mournful night-bird, he flapped out into the open, and suddenly found himself within the circle of illumination cast by two bedroom candles, which lit up the fol-

lowing spectacle: Mr. James Bush, with his hands on his knees, guffawing with all his might, and Lady Drake, seated on the floor in an Eastern position, attired in an Indian shawl, with her lap full of cigars, brandy-balls, coppers, luggage-labels, boxes of pills, sticks of chocolate, rolls of curl-papers, pear-drops, and sealing-wax.

CHAPTER XII

THE CONSEQUENCES OF LADY DRAKE'S SUPPER

Lady Drake was a woman of the very strictest propriety. It seems necessary to state the fact at this juncture. She was a woman of the strictest propriety, and, indeed, was inclined to carry respectability to excess, but she was of a hungry disposition. The descendant of an ancient family of large feeders, she very naturally possessed their main characteristics. Her temperament required a good deal of food to be administered to it at frequent intervals, and even in the watches of the night she was by no means certain to be exempt from sudden accesses of what in a man might have been called voracity. To combat these effectually, she usually kept a large supply of biscuits, potted meats, and other necessities by her bedside, and if she woke at any time, would apply herself to these, banish by their means the promptings of heredity, and then, turning over, fall quietly to sleep again, calmed, nourished, and altogether built up. In the hurry of her departure to Ribton Marches, however, she had omitted to provision herself as was her habit, and, being of a highly sensitive disposition, she did not care to disclose the emptiness of her nocturnal larder to those in charge of the commissariat of the palace. On the Monday night she had managed to secrete a dozen or so of chocolates at dessert, and this booty had secured her from actual starvation, although

it had not prevented her from suffering severely during the dark hours. But on Tuesday, the chocolates having given out, and her position at dinner precluding the possibility of another successful raid, her case was sad indeed, and something very like starvation stared her in the face.

Under these circumstances Lady Drake became more acidulated than usual, and worried his Grace during the evening with even more than her normal pertinacity and success. And yet it was her victim who eventually heaped coals of fire upon her neat bandeaux, for it was the Duke who explained to her, in the very moment of her despair, those beautiful inventions placed by the Bun Emperor about his palace for the mechanical feeding of the hungry, and the solace of those who wandered abroad in search of luggage-labels and the reviving pill. Lady Drake went up to bed greatly comforted, and fully resolved that, when the palace was wrapped in slumber, she would fare forth, penny-wise, in search of that sustenance which she would most certainly be requiring long before the men dropped their cigar-ends and went up to their rooms. The men were late in going, and Lady Drake, after one or two furtive expeditions to the head of the stairs, rewarded by hideous visions of Mr. Bush resting beside a glass of whisky-and-water, in despair lay down, and, to her extreme surprise, fell fast asleep.

She woke soon after three, feeling heredity strong upon her. Accordingly she got up, wrapped herself in the Indian shawl dressing-gown that was her patent of courtly breeding, took a candlestick in one hand and three shillings and fourpence worth of coppers in the other, and set bravely forth upon her adventure. Down the mighty stairs she tripped, her heart beating high

with pleasant anticipations, careless of the gloomy solitude in which the mighty hall was wrapped, intent only upon the satisfaction of an inherited appetite. She gained the bottom of the stairs. All was silent. But the friendly candle flickered upon the blessed machine in whose interior lay hid, as in a mine, such golden dainties—soft, succulent butter-scotch, the pale and rounded peppermint, the crunching bar of cocoanut-ice, and the insidious but rewarding brandy-ball. Her ladyship trembled with rapture as she surveyed it. For one brief instant she devoured it with her tiny eyes like pin-points. Then she placed her candle carefully down, grasped her forty coppers, and crept ravenously forward on slippered feet. She was about to enjoy a supper of some forty courses. The thought shook her to the very soul.

She gained the machine, and her glance ran passionately over its pretty knobs, its delicate buttons, the minute let-in labels which indicated the lairs of its various inhabitants. Which sweet should she treat like the wily badger and "draw" first? After a period of profound meditation, she resolved to open her banquet with a packet of "golden candy." She therefore advanced, placed a penny in the slot, and promptly received a parcel of luggage-labels with pink insertions full of twine. Lady Drake was staggered. Although a traveller, she had never accustomed herself to support life on addresses. But her ardour was only dashed for a moment. Reasoning that one mistake should only lift her on stepping-stones to higher things, and acutely surmising that if luggage-labels occupied the home of "golden candy," "golden candy" should fill the place of luggage-labels, she placed another penny in the slot, and grasping the drawer marked "luggage-labels," was the prompt recipient of yet another parcel of those useful

articles. Her ladyship was now irritated. These delays increased her already sharp-set appetite. With a bitter exclamation she thrust a third copper into the slot, attacked a drawer marked "peppermints, extra strong," and was instantly the proud possessor of a neat black button-hook with a cork handle. Many persons of weak character would now have desisted from further perseverance, and have retired, depressed and supperless to bed. But Lady Drake had not been married to a V.C. without catching the complaint of courage. She had now lost threepence, and was still famishing. Her situation seemed desperate, but she rose to the occasion. A dogged expression came into her tiny, peaked countenance. She seized a chair, placed it before the machine, and sat down with the fixed determination of pressing every button and pulling every knob before she left the battle-field. She meant to have it thoroughly out with the machine. She was resolved to fight to the death. A thousand button-hooks should not turn her from her purpose. In went another copper—another knob was pulled, but this time with a result so remarkable that Lady Drake almost screamed aloud. For all of a sudden an immense jet of pennies spouted forth into her lap and well-nigh submerged her. She was drenched in the coinage of departed generations of sugar-plum seekers, and was rendered breathless by their proved determination to be fed. She nearly succumbed under this wave of misfortune and coppers, but her grit saved her, and, beating aside the flood with her tiny hands as one that swims, she pressed button after button, attacked knob after knob, with all the frenzy of a passionate nature in arms, reckless of danger, heedless of death. Lady Drake "saw red," and had the judgment-day suddenly dawned behind the lattice-windows of the

hall, she would still have fought on, still have pressed forward, headlong to glory—and food. A crash of cigars did not daunt her. A cloud of pills nearly blinded but could not deter her. Dutch dolls beset her, but she overcame them. Showers of cherry-blossoms broke over her from collapsible squirts, stamps flew round her like falling leaves in autumn—she scarcely knew it. And at last she had her reward. The sweets began to come, heralded by the exquisite eruption of a sugar pig, with a string tail and pink eyebrows all complete. With a piping cry she greeted it and its lovely following, a crowd of all the wonders known to a greater than Fuller. They poured upon the tiny dauntless creature with a passionate ardour, filling her lap to the very brim, until the last knob was grasped, the last button had yielded to her frantic thumb. And just at this moment Mr. James Bush laid an enormous hand on Lady Drake's shoulder, and, with a scream of surprise, she turned round, slipped from her chair, and assumed that Eastern posture in which she was discovered by Mr. Harrison as he fled from the cursing telephone.

Now the Duke, who was a heavy man but a light sleeper, heard Lady Drake's scream in his dreams. It was followed by the bang of a door, as Chloe, unobserved by the engrossed couple in the hall, gained her bedroom and flung herself in a fit of laughter upon her pillow. The bang decided the Duke to wake up. He carried out his decision with manly promptitude, and, bounding out upon the landing, protruded his head over the oaken balustrade and beheld Lady Drake seated upon the floor in a dressing-gown, apparently engaged in friendly intercourse with the man from Bungay. His Grace did not perceive Mr. Harrison, who had not yet emerged into the circle of light. Therefore, after a

moment of careful contemplation, the Duke returned chuckling to his apartment, and, murmuring something vague about "not spoiling sport," and a mumbling conviction that he had always thought that fellow Bush was "a bit of a dog," lay down again to laugh.

Meanwhile, the courage which had supported Lady Drake during her fight with the machine, was ebbing away under a stress of circumstances sufficient to appall the stoutest heart. Although her temper had given her a great victory over the Bun Emperor's patent, her respectability took serious umbrage at being discovered at four o'clock in the morning, immodestly draped in an Indian shawl, by an immense rustic of whom she knew nothing. Still, the little thing was grown so intrepid by association with the late deceased V.C. that she might have borne up against Mr. Bush. But the apparition of the groom of the chambers in full flight, the sound of his wailing cry, the sight of his disordered appearance and starting eyes, upset a mind and body naturally fatigued in the reaction that invariably succeeds a great crisis. Lady Drake remained upon the floor for about a couple of minutes, gazing fixedly at Mr. Bush and Mr. Harrison, and mechanically grasping in each hand two melting fragments of Turkish delight, vaguely thought of by her as defensive weapons against wicked men. Then, either forced to the conviction that such confectations could hardly avail her much in a physical contest, or moved by some unreasonable fancy of the mind feminine, she got up very suddenly, and covering her retreat by a volley of edibles and miscellaneous articles of steel, wood and papier-maché, she walked upstairs, having hysterics all the way, and vanished in a piping yell like the note of a toy terrier under the spell of music.

Mr. Bush and Mr. Harrison, their persons and hair

decorated with a thousand sugar plums, remained staring at each other aghast. Then Mr. Bush, extracting from his beard a surprise packet, two brandy-balls, and a pen-knife, solemnly turned and walked away to bed without deigning to speak to the groom of the chambers, who was left to make the best of his way to his apartment in a condition nearly bordering upon homicidal mania. Indeed, he knew not whether he waked or dreamed, whether he was in a nightmare, or whether he had merely become unexpectedly delirious. Only in the morning, when he woke to find his whiskers full of Everton toffee, did he realize that in very truth the Londoners had been holding their unhallowed revels in the sacred palace of the Emperor, and that it was incumbent upon him to get up if he was to be in time to be skinned by eight o'clock, according to the agreement made over night with his imperial master.

The early beams of the bright and cheerful summer sun shone gaily over the Ribton Marches domain as the wretched Mr. Harrison, carrying in one hand the enormous volume containing his "Report of the Conduct of the Londoners on Tuesday, the — of June, 18—," set forth to the fishing cottage to meet his doom. He walked very slowly, with that lingering gait peculiar to men in his dreadful circumstances, and occasionally rent the delicious morning atmosphere with lamentations which might have moved a heart of stone. But even the slowest walker arrives at the skinning post at last, and, as the clocks struck eight, Mr. Harrison's protruding eyes beheld the glittering sheet of water on whose verge stood the small pavilion where dwelt his banished master.

The Bun Emperor was up and already stationed in

the embrasure examining the horizon through the telescope which had so alarmed Mr. Bush. His visage was empurpled. His hands, when not employed, clenched and unclenched themselves with threatening vivacity. Already, in fancy, they seemed to be at work on Mr. Harrison's outer integument. The groom of the chambers paused beside the pond and looked across its waters with an expression of wild entreaty. The Emperor dashed the window open.

"Come on!" he bawled.

"Sir!" cried Mr. Harrison, in a failing voice.

"Come on directly this minute!" shouted the Emperor, as the small and rounded form of the Empress joined him, gazing through the field-glasses at the agitated menial. "Come on, or you 'll repent it to the last hour of your mortal life, you will!"

"Oh, by all means, most certainly—oh, most decidedly yes!" faltered Mr. Harrison, wavering very slowly around the pond in the direction of the cottage. "Oh, indeed—rely—on!"

"Make haste!" yelled the Emperor in a voice of thunder.

"Oh, you wicked, ungrateful man!" squeaked the Empress. "Oh, to think that it should come to this!"

Mr. Harrison was now upon the gravel path before the cottage, and between it and the pond. He stood still again.

"Come in this moment!" said the Emperor fiercely.

But Mr. Harrison did not obey this behest. Terror rooted him to the spot. He shook his head despairingly some dozen times or more.

"Come in!" reiterated the Emperor. "Do you dare to defy me?"

"Wicked, wicked man!" cried the Empress.

"Let me explain, sir! Oh, indeed, I will explain!" murmured Mr. Harrison, trying to gain time.

"Coward!" said the Emperor, with scathing bitterness. "You know I can't come out to get at you! You know I've given my word to the fiddle-faced feller. Coward!"

"Cowardly custard!" added the Empress with feminine force, and a manner of the keenest vituperation.

But Mr. Harrison was turned into cast iron by fear.

"I will not come in, sir, to be skinned—no, I will not! by no means, on no account whatever," he explained. "No, I will not, if I stays here till the Doomsday—no, indeed!"

This intrepid reply evidently took the Emperor aback. He hesitated and held a whispered parley with his consort. Then he cried:

"You 'd better come in!" with ferocity.

"Oh, no, sir—no indeed, not at all! I will not, indeed, you may depend upon me! Rely on me, I will not!" said Mr. Harrison with brazen timidity.

The Emperor again consulted with his helpmeet, who evidently urged a compromise, for he finally said:

"I'll keep my hands from you, but come in you shall!"

"Sir!" said Mr. Harrison, preparing to make conditions.

"Come in, I say, and I'll keep my hands off you!"

"And Mrs. Lite, sir?" said the cautious menial. "She will not attempt to injure me—oh, dear, no, on no account whatever!"

The Empress gave her word, and Mr. Harrison proceeded to the front door, and was quickly in the audience parlour. Now extreme fear lends to some men

brains. Mr. Harrison's fear was extreme, so extreme that, during his passage from the pond to the parlour, his mind became brilliant, and he formed a plan of campaign, which he at once proceeded to carry out with the skill of an accomplished general and actor. Instead of merely entering the parlour then, he burst into it with this remarkable utterance:

"Lord, sir, Lord! The doings of the Londoners! Lord, sir! The behaviour of them as is in your place! Their goings on! Their treatment of your inventions! Their tampering with Mrs. Lite's parrots! Their violence to me! Their manners with the telephone—Lord! Lord! To see them with the orchestrion! Only to see them! It is awful! Lord, sir, Lord! Their proceedings of a night time! Sweet-eating! Getting at your labels! Flying at me with your button-hooks! Assaulting of me because I carry out your orders! Lord, sir, Lord! If I am driven mad it is no wonder—oh, no, indeed! by no means, on no account whatever!"

And he sank down upon a chair, as if in the very extremity of horror, as indeed, from other causes than those mentioned he truly was. The Emperor and Empress turned ghastly pale as they surveyed him, and they, too, sat down abruptly.

"The worst has come!" said the Emperor, in a broken voice. "Henrietta, the worst has come along!"

"And worse than that, sir, you may depend upon me," said Mr. Harrison, plucking up courage and invention as he perceived the success of his wily ruse.

"And worse, Henrietta!" said the Emperor with intense emotion.

"The home! Our little home!" the Empress wailed, forgetting the size of Ribton Marches. "They are breaking up the home!"

"They are indeed, ma'am! They are. Oh, yes—most certainly they are!"

"What did I say?" eloquently rejoined the Empress.

"What did I always and ever say?"

Nobody seeming to have any idea, she repeated her question six or eight times, and burst into a flood of tears. The Emperor pressed her fat hands with his own, and endeavoured not to choke before a servant. He failed, however, and Mr. Harrison saw that he had won his day and secured the safety of his person. With remarkable conviction and a fine choice of language, he therefore began to amplify.

"It begun yesterday, sir, I might say," he remarked, wringing his hands in an ostentatious manner. "It begun with them throwing me, sir, from one of your private hammicks, in which I was concealed to watch, according to your orders—throwing me out on my face, sir, flat, and laughing at what they done."

"The brutes!" sobbed the Empress. "The inhuman things! The brutes!"

"Yes, ma'am, it was nearly being my death, the heavy fall and shock. It was Mr. Rodney, I should say, what done it, with his own hands, Mrs. Veddleham standing by and laughing fit to split her sides."

"Hussy!" murmured the Empress. "Thieving hussy!"

"Exactly, ma'am. But there was worse to come. Being thrown down I could have stood, but could not stand being run at of a night time when doing my duty according to your and Mr. Lite's directions, which was: 'Be about, Mr. Harrison, here and there, and keep an eye, a special eye, on that there Mr. Bush, and at the telephone punctual to the moment at three,' and then to be to and fro till morning; which I would have till I dropped, and was, though her ladyship, when caught by

me with Mr. Bush a-tampering with one of your machines, sir, made for me, sir, him helping of her, and she only in a shawl, ma'am, and he anyhow, with his beard all a-full of your belongings, sir, as I took from him, though nearly laid low; and she screaming up the stairs with her hands that full of your Turkish delight as she could hardly walk, and me following after, and would have got it from her, but Mr. Bush took me unawares from behind, sir, like a coward; and if I escaped with my life, ma'am, it is a wonder—oh, most decidedly; yes, indeed, at all times it is a wonder!"

The groom of the chambers, having perorated, paused. There was a dead and awful silence. The stricken couple were rendered dumb by the magnitude of their horror. That the world should contain such wickedness, and that the Emperor, for a paltry bit of bun-praise, should have let the home to it! Even the Empress forgot to wail. She rested her head against the telescope, and closed her eyes as if to shut out the visions conjured up by Mr. Harrison's recital. Some minutes must have elapsed before she opened them and whispered, with a blush that did her the greatest credit, "And her only in a shawl!"

"My dear," said the Emperor, "my love, remember the presence of Mr. Harrison."

The Empress remembered it, and blushed again. The Emperor now turned towards the man he had intended to skin, and said, with all the frank readiness to own a fault which is only found in a noble nature:

"Mr. Harrison, I was mistook. You have done your duty, and myself and Mrs. Lite shall not forget it. You will receive those perquisites which are your bounden due."

Mr. Harrison got up and inclined himself.

"Though whatever you meant through the telephone," added the Emperor, clouding over again, "mercy only knows!"

"Yes, mercy knows!" concurred the Empress.

Mr. Harrison had no idea to what his master was alluding, but he thought it right and proper to say:

"Through the telephone, sir? I was mad, sir. They have drove me mad—most decidedly, yes, they had."

"Was you mad when you says, 'Dance away and be damned?' " said the Emperor.

"Sir!" cried Mr. Harrison, cold with surprise.

"Was you mad when you says to Mrs. Lite, 'Go to blazes?' "

"Oh, most decidedly, oh, undoubtedly I was, sir!"

"And when you tells me to give a bullock sulphur?"

"Did I, sir?" said Mr. Harrison, beaded with perspiration.

"Mr. Harrison, you did," said the Emperor, with pathetic impressiveness; "and that I was to keep my hair on, look after the sheep and again be damned, Mr. Harrison."

"It was madness, sir; it was indeed, it must have been; oh, not a doubt of it! There can be no question—a bullock sulphur, dance and be— Oh, dear! oh, dear! It was madness—oh, most certainly."

"Enough, Mr. Harrison!" said the Emperor with benign condescension. "Enough! Mrs. Lite and me, believing that you was driven mad, will overlook the expressions which should not have come from you to such as us. Enough, Mr. Harrison, enough!"

If Mr. Harrison, touched to the quick by this sublime expression of pardon, fell at his master's feet, who shall blame him? Who shall call him servile? Only greatness and gratitude can properly worship greatness.

In the council of war which followed, potentate and subject consulted together on equal terms as to what should be done in consequence of the dreadful circumstances which had arisen in the palace from Lady Drake's hereditary instinct for suppers. Measures were concerted, plans were laid, and the groom of the chambers retired from the presence at about ten o'clock, primed with so many orders and injunctions that the madness to which he had falsely sworn seemed not unlikely soon to come upon him in stern reality.

Meanwhile, although tragedy flapped one sable wing above the fishing cottage, she managed to flap the other over some portion of the adjacent palace. In the Emperor's magnificent halls, various members of wicked tribe which so afflicted the worthy owner were in a state of agitation. Mr. Rodney, of course, was one. If there was any agitation going, he was generally in it. That morning he had received a letter from his excellent friend and most amusing correspondent, Lord Bernard Roche. From this communication it appeared that Lord Bernard had been, and still was, away from New York, which accounted for his delay in replying to Mr. Rodney's letter. But it was not this absence which agitated Mr. Rodney, and caused those impressive wrinkles which now seemed permanent dwellers in his long face. No, Lord Bernard went on to discuss the Van Adam affair, and to say:

"I fail to understand your remarks about poor dear old Huskinson. You seem to imply that you have met him in England, although you do not actually say so. But as far as I know he is still in Florida, with the beloved Boswell for his only companion. Perhaps you have met a relation of the same name. There are, I fancy, several Huskinson Van Adams. Huskinson is a

family name, and the family are very fond of it, and so it figures at many Van Adam christenings. My old friend is the best known of the clan, a fine, strapping fellow, very American, but none the worse for that, indeed all the better for it. They are a grand nation. Just as I am posting this I hear an amazing piece of news, that Huskinson is just sailing for England with Boswell. It seems that he has discovered that his wife is innocent of the charge on which he got his divorce. The Crackers who gave evidence perjured themselves because they thought he wanted to get rid of his Chloe, and would make it all right for them. Having found out their mistake, and that poor old Huskinson only acted hastily in a fit of temper, they have now been telling the truth with amazing vigour. Mrs. Van Adam is believed to be in England, and Huskinson means to find her and try to persuade her to re-marry him. Heaven knows how it will all end."

Reading this missive over a bit of dry toast at breakfast, Mr. Rodney was mightily perplexed. Huskinson a strapping fellow and very American! Huskinson accompanied by Boswell! Huskinson despairingly searching for his Chloe! Huskinson just sailing for England! What could this mean? Lord Bernard must be mistaken in some of his items of information, and must be of an imaginative turn of mind if he regarded the very slight youth now in Ribton Marches who knew Paris so intimately, and talked English so like an Englishman, as "strapping" and "very American." Besides, where was the monkey? Where was the faithful and fondled Boswell? Mr. Rodney glanced across from his letter to Chloe, who sat opposite to him eating a poached egg calmly. They were the only breakfast eaters.

"A monkey must be a great solace in moments of depression, I imagine, Van Adam," murmured Mr. Rodney gently.

"Pardon?" said Chloe, drinking some tea.

"I imagine that the companionship of a monkey must be of great assistance when—when a man has to face a world of—of trouble."

"Gracious me! I hate the little brutes!" cried Chloe, taken off her guard.

Mr. Rodney jumped, and glanced again at Lord Bernard's letter. "The beloved Boswell!" There it stood in black and white. What did this mean?

"You hate Boswell?" said Mr. Rodney, fixing his indefinite eyes on Chloe, and, without knowing it, touching with a tapping forefinger like a Queen's Counsel the open letter of Lord Bernard. Chloe saw the gesture, recognised her mistake, and had a cold shiver as she wondered whom the letter was from.

"Boswell! Oh, he's different!" she said hastily. "He's more like a monkey than a friend—I mean more like a friend than a monkey. Dear little Boswell! Oh, he's quite different."

"I almost wonder you could bring yourself to part from him," said Mr. Rodney, smoothly.

"By Jove! so do I. But climate, you know. What suits one monkey does n't suit another. If you bring a monkey up in Florida, he can't live over here. It's what they're accustomed to—like people, you know!"

The close was vague, and, feeling this, Chloe pushed back her chair, and murmuring something about a "cigarette in the garden," hurried out of the room. Mr. Rodney observed her confusion, and an awful thought flashed through his brain-pan. Could it be that Mrs. Verulam was being tricked by an adventurer? Could—

Lady Drake pattered in to breakfast, followed almost immediately by the Duke of Southborough.

Lady Drake, who looked, if possible, even more acidulated and demure than usual, was ravenous after the frustrated purpose of the previous night. She perched upon her chair, and stretched her small hands for various foods, with difficulty concealing cannibal instincts. The Duke reposed his lanky frame beside her, and placed his tongue in his cheek as the clown does when he conceals the red-hot poker from the policeman who will presently be frizzled. He had long been worried by Lady Drake. Now he meant to worry her.

"I hope you had a good long night, Lady Drake?" He spoke with sinister geniality.

"Very," piped Lady Drake, cutting into a cutlet with a knife that seemed trembling with eagerness.

"You slept well?" said Mr. Rodney, unconsciously backing up his Grace.

"Beautifully. I've got a quiet conscience."

She threw this last at the Duke with a tiny sneer, which curled her little withered face grotesquely. The Duke got the red-hot poker ready.

"Someone in the house has n't, I fancy," he said, drawling out his words, and fixing his eyes like an actor about to make a point to the gallery; "someone in the house is of a very restless temperament."

Lady Drake looked at him with the sudden sharpness of a mouse on the alert.

"Oh!" she cried, "there are always noises in a big house at night—furniture cracks."

"Yes," said the Duke, bringing the poker forward. "And armchairs scream, do n't they? I've often noticed it."

Lady Drake winked her little eyes rapidly, and the

pale yellow of her complexion began to change to a very delicate green, like the leaf of a blanched lettuce.

"And," his Grace continued, with most delicate raillery, "sofas sit on the floor, and then run upstairs like express trains if they're startled, do n't they? I should like to see Wardour Street—let us say half-past three to four in the morning."

The policeman was frizzling. Lady Drake let her cutlet get as cold as she was.

"I see you believe in table-turning," said Mr. Rodney to the Duke. His mind was still in a confusion, and he was only half following the conversation. "Animal magnetism is very remarkable—very," he added mildly.

"It is, indeed," said the Duke; "if only you touch hands; eh, Lady Drake?"

"I think there's nothing in it; and if there is, it's exceedingly wrong," she said, with a violent effort to go on seeming respectable under the gaze of a Duke who, she now felt, believed her otherwise.

"Your cutlet is cold," the Duke said. "Let me—bring her ladyship a slice of broiled ham," he added to a footman.

The footman obeyed. Lady Drake pecked at it; even her hunger was deserting her before she had gratified it.

"Mr. Bush would make a fine medium, I fancy," continued the Duke—"a fine, steady medium. What do you say, Lady Drake?"

The little creature writhed. She was now quite certain that his Grace had suffered from insomnia the night before.

"I do n't know anything about Mr. Bush," she said, letting her fork drop with a clatter.

"You have never 'sat' with him?"

"Oh, dear, no!"

"On the floor?" added the Duke.

Lady Drake laid down her knife and trembled, while Mr. Rodney, smoothly unaware that anything was wrong said:

"Is that the last new thing in spiritualism—to sit on the floor?"

"Lady Drake will inform you," said his Grace.

And then, satisfied with his revenge for many an hour of irritation, and many a searching query into those little matters which he preferred to keep a secret, he applied himself to his breakfast, pleased that the wretched little old person beside him was now quite unable to manage hers.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SIX SELF-CONSCIOUS GARDENERS

Although Lady Sage, owing to temporary indisposition and the fact that Wednesday at Ascot is comparatively an "off day," did not honour the Wednesday races with her venerable presence, it was apparent both to Mrs. Verulam and to the now appalled owner of Mitching Dean that her tongue had been very busy on the preceding afternoon, and that she had doubtless proclaimed the intentions which she had not yet been able to carry out. For Mrs. Verulam was cold-shouldered by various good people, both in the Enclosure, in the paddock, and on the lawn. The Lady Jane Clinch, famous for her luncheons, snorted at her twice in a manner to attract attention and evoke imitation. Baroness Clayfield-Moor, kindest of women, shuffled her feet as Mrs. Verulam drew near, and assumed an expression of rapt abstraction, such as may be seen upon the faces of seraphs in an oleograph. And Mrs. Brainton Gumm, the Banana Queen, upon whom Mrs. Verulam had never left cards—disliking bananas, which she considered tasted medicinal—Mrs. Gumm bridled violently at Mrs. Verulam, and tossed her head in most West Indian fashion, murmuring something mysterious about "the manner in which that sort of thing would have been treated in the old days at Spanish Town." Mr. Rodney heard this last remark and was all of a tremble. He resolved, directly

he found himself again at Mitching Dean, to consult his library, and look up ancient Spanish Town customs. Visions of Mrs. Verulam thrown to the tigers and alligators which he vaguely considered to swarm in all distant settlements, haunted him perpetually, and his distress was greatly complicated by the extraordinary letter of Lord Bernard. During the afternoon Mrs. Verulam and he found themselves for a moment in a quiet corner at the back of the Royal Enclosure, and Mr. Rodney seized the opportunity to utter a few fragments of his confusion and suspicion.

"Let me speak, Mrs. Verulam," he began with unwonted agitation and a manner as if she had been holding a pillow over his mouth for the last few days—"let me—oh, do let me speak!"

Mrs. Verulam put up a pale-blue parasol.

"Certainly," she said, idly watching Lady Cynthia Green, who was making puns to Sir Brigham Lockbury in the middle distance—"certainly."

"Mrs. Verulam," he continued, without much subtlety of exposition, "you are marching to your doom—you are indeed! And all for what?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, all for which—whom?" he cried in an under-voice, seeking grammar. "Do you know? Are you not being deceived?"

"My dear friend, that lunch in the guard's Enclosure has not suited you. You ought to be more careful."

"It is not lunch. It is you—it is him—it is Lord Bernard's letter," said Mr. Rodney, stating facts with extraordinary rapidity and looking distracted.

"Lord Bernard's letter?" said Mrs. Verulam, who had not succeeded in being alone with Chloe since breakfast.

"I heard from him this morning," said Mr. Rodney. And he proceeded to condense his lordship's information. Mrs. Verulam listened in silence. "What does this mean?" concluded Mr. Rodney passionately, flicking a speck of dust from his left coat-sleeve. "Is Lord Bernard mad? Is he misinformed?"

"Both, very probably," murmured Mrs. Verulam, wondering what the conversation of a misinformed mad-man would be like.

"Or," proceeded Mr. Rodney, in a voice that quivered with suspicion, "can it be that—that—"

"Yes?"

"I can hardly force myself to say it—that an adventurer has crept over your threshold? That a monster in mortal guise has dared to take the name of—"

"Huskinson! Now, Mr. Rodney, you are a man of the world. I ask you, can you bring yourself to believe that any human being not christened so would for any purpose whatever assume such a name as Huskinson?"

This was a poser.

"It does not seem very likely," truth compelled him to reply.

"I knew your intellect would not desert you," she said kindly. "Now take me back to the Enclosure."

"But—but Lady Jane Clinch, Mrs. Brainton Gumm—they—they are—"

"They are endeavouring to be offensive," said Mrs. Verulam, with a slightly rising colour, but endeavouring to support herself with thoughts of her desire for the true life and Mr. James Bush. "But if they only knew how I long to be allowed to escape from this cage, they would try to shut the door which they are opening."

Mr. Rodney stared upon her with a white face.

"You think I am mad and misinformed, as well as

Lord Bernard?" she said, smiling. "Come, take me back."

Mr. Rodney took her, endeavouring to prevent his agony from appearing in colours that would be perceptible to his world. He cannot have been entirely successful in this endeavour, for several countesses remarked towards the end of the day that "really Mr. Rodney begins to look very old."

Meanwhile Chloe was becoming reckless, as people do when they know that the Cinderella clock of time will shortly strike, and a transformation of rags and a pumpkin take the place of silken attire and gilt coach and horses. If the *World* paragraph were true, if Huskinson were really in England, her game was nearly up; her hour was at hand. This Ascot was the closing revel, and even this Ascot might be interrupted—might be cut off short for her. Good-bye then to ducal circles and the pomp of English society, bristling with ancient names. In fancy, she heard the tick-tick of the Cinderella clock; she heard the warning buzz that precedes its announcement of the dreary midnight. She saw the tall hat, the frock-coat and trousers vanish in a mist of tears, and with it how much ecstasy! And a devil-may-care mood took possession of her soul. She would squeeze the inmost essence out of these last flying golden moments; she would drink her little wine-cup to the lees. And so, when Mrs. Verulam and Mr. Rodney returned to the Enclosure, they found her the centre of a group of smart women, and watched with glittering eyes by the Lady Pearl, talking with amazing vivacity, laughing in a gaiety that was almost fierce, and making herself slightly more conspicuous than was altogether *comme il faut*. Mr. Rodney, governed by his feelings and so endowed with a distorted vision, considered that Van Adam was behav-

ing outrageously—if he was Van Adam at all. And even Mrs. Verulam was a little surprised at Chloe's intense vivacity, and at the stream of audacious conversation that flowed so incessantly from her lips. When Chloe joined them, Mr. Rodney felt as if the eyes of the universe were directed upon the group they formed, and that even his proved and universally-accepted social standing and pre-eminent respectability could not save Mrs. Verulam from instant and eternal condemnation. He saw the small and attentive green eyes of Lady Jane Clinch observing them persistently beneath the shadow of her huge black parasol. He noted the plantation-song pantomime of the Banana Queen, who, attired in a flame-coloured brocade, was being wooed by the impecunious members of the British aristocracy. And, worse than all, he perceived the indignant colour flood the large face of the Duchess of Southborough as she marked Chloe bend familiarly to Mrs. Verulam and pour into her really shell-like ear the tale of a dozen reckless and immoderate wagers. For Chloe had been betting wildly and had lost a good deal of money. He was thankful indeed when the races were over, and the party drove home in the dust to Ribton Marches. On arriving, and strolling forth into the garden to rest and be thankful, they found various men dotted here and there—to the number of perhaps half a dozen—busily engaged among the Bun Emperor's plants and shrubs, or rolling and watering the lawns.

"Dear me, what an influx of gardeners!" said the Duchess. "It gives the grounds quite a crowded appearance. This must be a terribly expensive place to keep up."

Mr. Bush, who had cut off his roundabout for one day, turned his large eyes upon the busy labourers.

"If they keep on as they 're a-keepin' now," he said, "there won't be a bloomin' flower within fifty mile this time to-morrow."

And he rolled towards the tea-tables. Miss Bindler put up her eye-glass and surveyed the scene. One man was apparently trying to pluck up a fine rose-tree by the roots; another was behaving with almost inhuman levity among some sunflowers; a third seemed to be having a stand-up fight with a laurestinus; a fourth was watering nothing at all with an enormous hose directed at a small cloud which was coming up from Sunningdale; and the remaining two were furiously trying to roll a tiny gravel walk with a roller, which managed them to such an extent that it seemed certain they would soon present the thin appearance of a film of flour fresh from the pressure of the rolling-pin. Away in the far distance the Bun Emperor's head-gardener stood weeping and wringing his horny hands beneath a copper beech, while Mr. Harrison was addressing to him what might be either oaths or words of comfort. It was impossible to discover which without the aid of a telescope. Miss Bindler dropped her eye-glass. It struck one of the huge buttons that sat about on the corduroy coat she wore and tinkled in a manly manner.

"If those men were my gardeners," she remarked, "I should have them up before the nearest magistrate for damaging my property. No tea, thanks. A whisky-and-seltzer, a biscuit, and a lump of ice."

"How self-conscious they look!" said the Lady Pearl, with a languishing air.

"Gardeners always do," said Lady Drake; "they think themselves the only artistic people among the wage-earning classes. Silly!"

She accepted a crumpet, despite the great heat.

"A gardener can be very attractive though—eh, Lady Drake?" said the Duke, glancing from her withered face to Mr. Bush in an ostentatious manner.

Lady Drake suddenly remembered Mr. Bush's amiable profession, and was unable to give the crumpet its due and swallow it.

"I think that gardening is a high-minded and beautiful occupation. Oh!" cried Mrs. Verulam.

This last exclamation was occasioned by the behaviour of the gentleman with the hose, who, suddenly turning his attention from the Sunningdale cloud to the house-party, sprayed the tea-table nearest to him, at which were peacefully seated Mrs. Verulam, Mr. Ingerstall, and Mr. Rodney. The two former were only slightly watered, but the latter received about a ton and a half of cold liquid upon his head and down his delicate back. He uttered a cry like that which rises to heaven from a sinking ship with a large load of emigrants aboard.

"Wet?" said Miss Bindler. "Much better take your liquids internally."

"Wet? I am saturated! I am drenched!" cried the owner of Mitching Dean; while the gentleman with the hose ran off in the direction of London as fast as his legs would carry him. "I must go in and—these liberties are really unpardonable. The gardeners at Mitching Dean would never dare to treat a visitor with such gross familiarity!"

He hastened away, presenting the distressed back of a man whose every movement floods his spinal cord with sudden showers of displaced cold water.

"Mr. Rodney's wrong," Miss Bindler said, with her usual short decision.

"Wrong?" said the Duchess. "To sit at tea under a hose without knowing it? Anyone might do the same

with such gardeners. Mr. Lite ought not to engage them."

"Do n't abuse the man," said Miss Bindler; "he did n't do it on purpose."

"Then why did he run away?" asked Lady Drake.

"Because he's a coward and a quick sprinter," said Miss Bindler. "He was watching us and forgot his hose. All the gardeners are watching us."

The house-party started slightly, and, looking about them with opened eyes, were soon aware that Miss Bindler had followed her usual habit of speaking the truth. The self-conscious artists of the wage-earning world were, indeed, very intent upon those assembled about the tea-tables. The man who was disturbing the rose-tree in its home of years had his head set round like a deformity in a frantic effort to keep his eye on Lady Drake. The person who had been acting with levity among the sunflowers was now pretending to clip a diminutive box-hedge, and was in reality snapping the air while he gazed steadily at Mr. Bush. The individual who was fighting with the laurestinus had one eye fastened in a most expressive manner on Mr. Ingerstall, while the other seemed anxious to do sentry duty over Mrs. Verulam. And the gentlemen with the roller were staring at the whole party with a pertinacity and resolution which prevented them from observing that their enormous instrument was now doing its fell work upon an elaborately-conceived pattern of red, pink, and white geraniums.

"How very strange!" said the Duchess. "Are they a party of mesmerists, do you think? Really, it can scarcely be mere idle curiosity."

"The chap who's carving the atmosphere looks to me

like a third-rate detective," observed Miss Bindler, munching a captain's biscuit.

"They all look like third-rate detectives," said the Duke, who was well acquainted with that class of society, having been shadowed off and on for years by agents acting for anxious husbands suspicious of his clown's manner with their wives.

These words, at which most of the company were good enough to laugh, sent a cold shiver down Chloe's back. Detectives! She glanced at the gardeners, and in an instant sprang to the conclusion that they were the emissaries of Huskinson, who had bribed the Bun Emperor's servants to let them in, disguised, to the domain of Ribton Marches. Were not their ten eyes fastened upon her? Her legs trembled in their trousers. The Cinderella clock seemed striking. She felt that she was pale, and the laughter of those around her sounded hollow and mirthless. Did these men, skulking in their disguise of gardeners, recognise her for what she was—a woman? The idea made her hot. She fancied she saw the laurestinus man smile. He knew. The rose-tree man passed his hand across his face—to hide a laugh, no doubt. The roller couple bent down, and sent their machine over a quantity of blowing pinks. Chloe felt certain that their attitude was one of ridicule making for concealment. Had she been underneath the copper beech, her mind would have been relieved, for she would have heard the voice of Mr. Harrison saying to the Emperor's head-gardener:

"Them is Mr. Lite's orders, and must be carried out—oh, indeed!"

"I cawn't abear it—I cawn't abear it!" sobbed the head-gardener. "Only look at 'um a rolling of the

jerryaneums and a rooting up of the roses! I cawn't abear it!"

"You must abear it, Gummill," rejoined Mr. Harrison, with stern resolution. "Mr. Lite says to me: 'Mr. Harrison, get down detectives—oh, most decidedly—by all means, get 'em down! Plant them here and there about the garden, place them to and fro about the house, and do n't let them be knowst. If them Londoners,' he says, 'get up to their tricks, I 'll have the law on 'em, I will, and on you I depend, Mr. Harrison, to get proper witnesses as will convict judge and jury.' Them men," he pointed to the gardeners—"will convict any judge and jury; so abear it you must, Gummill—oh, most certainly, indeed, on every account whatever."

And with this exhortation he turned from the sobbing under-strapper and walked towards the palace, turning out his feet as he proceeded, and assuming, as he threaded his way among the detectives, a solemn dignity that was undoubtedly Jove-like.

The Duke of Southborough, when he had closely observed the Duchess's party of mesmerists, felt quite certain as to their calling, but, being a vain man, he mistook the reason of their presence; and while Chloe supposed them to be at Ribton Marches on her account, he had no doubt that they were watching him. He had a notion now that he had seen them at the races hovering about his steps. Honest men! He enjoyed such little attentions, and could not resist tipping Mr. James Bush the wink as the party rose from tea, and Mr. Bush lumbered at his side smoking a huge cigar presented to him by one of the men-servants; therefore the Duke nudged the paragon slyly in the ribs with his elbow, and said:

"See those men?"

"Eh?" said Mr. Bush.

"See those men who watered Rodney?"

Mr. Bush broke into a large laugh.

"Rodney 'll be sproutin'," he said—"Rodney 'll be sproutin'!"

"They are detectives," said the Duke—"Scotland Yard fellows."

Mr. Bush stared at the gardeners as if they were wild animals.

"What are they a-doin' of?" he asked. "What are they here for?"

"I 'll let you into the secret," said the Duke, whispering with great elaboration, and leaning to Mr. Bush's ear in a dramatic manner: "they 're here for me."

Mr. Bush made no reply, but turned his heavy eyes slowly from the Duke to the gardeners, and back again. The Duke again prodded him in the ribs, at the same time throwing up his left leg to a considerable height.

"You 're a bit of a dog, you know, yourself," he whispered; "you want watching, too. What? The husband that would trust you would soon find himself in Queer Street—eh, eh?"

And he went off sniggering to the billiard-room leaving Mr. Bush in some perplexity. The paragon, unaware of his Grace's insomnia on the previous night, did not comprehend these delicately masked allusions to the Lady Drake episode. He sat down heavily to consider them on a garden-seat, and before he fell into the doze which always eventually followed his assumption of a sitting posture, he had put two and two together with this result: Detective police were swarming about the garden. They were there for the Duke. The Duke considered that he, James Bush, was a bit of a dog and wanted watching, and held the opinion that the husband

who would trust him, James Bush, would soon find himself in Queer Street. Ergo the Duke had engaged gardeners to spy on him and her Grace of Southborough. It took the paragon exactly half an hour to reason all this out, having done which he fell asleep, murmuring gently, "Here 's a rum go! Here 's a bit of fun!" and proceeded to dream that gardeners were always detectives.

And the six self-conscious gardeners, now reduced to five, went on rooting up respectable plants and rolling innocent flowers till the twilight glided into night, and the Londoners went indoors and presently sat down to dinner.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUCHESS IN ASPIC

When ten people, eight of whom are labouring under delusions or suffering from engrossing mental complications, dine in company, and the banquet is supervised by a gentleman who is almost off his head, complete calm and the perfection of easy gaiety are not certain to ensue. There was, in fact, a good deal of constraint prevalent that night at Ribton Marches, constraint, however, varied by strange outbursts that kept things going, but scarcely kept them going in the average way of ordinary society. Only Miss Bindler and Mr. Ingerstall were fairly fancy-free that Wednesday night. Mrs. Verulam was abstracted because she wanted terribly to speak in private to Chloe, and inform her of Lord Bernard's letter to Mr. Rodney and of its strange contents. Chloe was abstracted because of the paragraph in the *World*, and the probable presence of the fatal Huskinson in England. The Duchess of Southborough was glowering with respectable fury against her hostess, and solicitude over the supposed wrongs of her gouty girl. The Lady Pearl was in a condition of highly-wrought sensibility to the fascinations of Chloe. Lady Drake was petrified by the knowledge that the Duke thought her what she was n't, and that Mr. Bush had beheld her in an Indian shawl at half-past three in the morning. The Duke could think of nothing with any

comfort except the five self-conscious gardeners now engaged, as he supposed, in ruining the Emperor's domain. Mr. Rodney, who believed himself to be in the incipient stage of rheumatic fever, looked like a corpse whose mind was seriously affected, and spoke like a voice reverberating from a sepulchre. And Mr. James Bush, who was seated next to the Duchess, was rent asunder by two contending passions, a desire to hint delicately to her Grace that she was supposed to be in love with him, and a desire to flee at once from the machinations of policemen to the marshy solitudes of peaceful Bungay. Pride and cowardice in fact contended in the paragon's mighty bosom, and almost succeeded in rendering him slightly volcanic. To crown the tragic humours of the feast, Mr. Harrison, very near to madness, stood during its progress with his feet turned out in the first position in the neighbourhood of an enormous sideboard, his face contorted into an expression of hysterical vigilance, his hands straying hither and thither among the glittering knives and forks which the Bun Emperor always had displayed as dining-room ornaments, even if Mrs. Lite were only eating a piece of thin bread and butter alone in the cedar-wood parlour.

The conversation round the dinner-table languished at first, then rose in fitful and confusing gusts. Only Mr. Ingerstall chatted continuously to Miss Bindler about Art and Paris, and she talked incessantly to him about bets and racing stables.

"I hope you are none the worse for your immersion at tea this afternoon?" said Mrs. Verulam to Mr. Rodney, with her eyes fixed steadily on Chloe.

"I fear I cannot hope to escape rheumatic fever," he answered. "To do so would indeed be foolish optimism."

"Quite so," she answered; "you are perfectly right."

"It is not every man who can say, with truth, that he has been followed by detectives almost continuously for five-and-forty years," said the Duke, with unusual dignity to Lady Drake.

Unable to meet his eyes, she piped in return: "It is not every man who can say anything at all with truth."

"Do you doubt my word?" he asked her, pursuing his train of thought.

She suddenly thought she perceived an opening into which she might insert an explanation of the preceding night's affair.

"I'll believe yours if you'll believe mine!" she cried.

"What!" said the Duke, "then you're followed by detectives, too!"

At this appalling corollary her ladyship collapsed. Evidently nothing on earth would ever convince his Grace that she was sinned against and not a sinner, if he thought her conduct so outrageous that she was habitually shadowed by the police! Although almost starving she could not eat another morsel.

"Do you think it right to be happy, Mr. Van Adam?" asked the Lady Pearl, in her cooing, thunderous voice, inherited from her mother. "Do you think we are meant to have any joy here? Oh, tell me, tell me!"

"Oh, dear, no!" Chloe replied, thinking of her hour of triumph—so soon to be over. She shook her head mournfully. "No, no! When we think all is going well we are sure to see the gardeners. The gardeners are certain to come upon us."

"Gardeners!" said the Lady Pearl, mystified. "Do you think that the misery of the world is caused by gardeners?"

"I do, indeed," answered Chloe, intent on her fate, and speaking with poignant conviction; "I am perfectly certain of it now."

"How strange! I wonder why it should be so; but perhaps we are not meant to know here."

"I do know; I know very well," said Chloe.

"Then why is it?" asked the Lady Pearl.

"Because"—Chloe suddenly recollected herself and paused—"because we are all gardeners," she said, assuming the portentous air of one who deals in allegories. "Do we not garden in each other's souls?"

"How exquisitely thoughtful you are!" said the Lady Pearl with ecstasy; "so different from a Guardsman!"

"Well, Mr. Bush," the Duchess said heavily, while she ate a cutlet, "how do you like the great world?"

Her Grace had heard Mrs. Verulam say that this was the paragon's first experience of that remarkable collection of absurdities.

"Eh?" said Mr. Bush, thrusting a cautious glance at the Duke—"eh?"

"Do you find it very different from your marshes?" continued the Duchess. "I suppose there are only frogs there?"

"When I catch a frog about," replied Mr. Bush, "I go for it."

"Indeed!" said her Grace, trying to seem amiably interested in these rustic pursuits. "And where does the frog go?"

"Not far," rejoined the paragon—"not far!" And he laughed like Fee-faw-fum.

"Dear me!" said the Duchess, "I am afraid you're quite a bloodthirsty person, like most men. But you're all the same; you must kill something. One man stalks a deer, another a—a frog. You shoot, I suppose?"

"No, I do n't," said Mr. Bush. "Frog-shootin' would n't pay; they go too slow."

At this point in his dissertation on English sport, her Grace suddenly started, caught hold of the table with both hands, and passionately struggled for breath.

"Got the staggers?" inquired Miss Bindler, who was sitting just opposite. "Keep your head up."

Mr. Rodney hastily began to pour cold water into a champagne glass, with a view to using it medicinally.

"Take it away!" gasped the Duchess. "Oh, take it away!" And she moved as a serpent moves when it thinks of casting its skin.

"Take what?" said Mr. Rodney. "What is it?"

"The aspic on my left shoulder—oh, take it away!"

"The asp on your left shoulder!" he cried, preparing for flight.

"No, no! The cutlet in aspic. Oh!"

A rapid search enabled Mr. Rodney to discover a jellied cutlet lodged upon her Grace's person. He endeavoured hastily to remove it with a fork, and in doing so nearly inflicted a severe wound.

"Use your hands, man!" said Miss Bindler; "always use your hands in such cases."

She spoke with authority, having attended many veterinary classes. Mr. Rodney hesitated; he had never handled a cutlet in his life, and he feared to begin a new career in middle age.

"Oh, take it away!" reiterated the Duchess; "it has been in ice! Oh, take it from me!"

"I—really—" stammered poor Mr. Rodney, while the Duchess leaned far forward bending down her head and shutting her eyes in anticipation of the operation. "Duke, I think it would be better if you—"

But the Duke was busily engaged in having fits of

laughter, so Mr. Rodney, flushing a brick red, hovered his long white hands above the unwelcome intruder.

"Oh, be quick!" cried the Duchess. "For Heaven's sake be quick; it feels like leeches."

"Here, clear out!" bellowed Mr. Bush to Mr. Rodney, who still shrank from clasping an edible, and, seizing her Grace with his huge hands, he tore the cutlet from her with manly resolution. The Duchess breathed again, while Mrs. Verulam's eyes became dewy with happy tears that sprang unbidden at this fresh instance of her hero's valour. How different from Mr. Rodney's pusillanimity! Mr. Bush threw the cutlet to a man-servant and burst out a-guffawing. It seemed he really had a delicate sense of humour. The Duchess turned to him.

"Thank you!" she said, with genuine emotion. "It would have killed me in another moment. Thank you—thank you, Mr. Bush!"

Mr. Bush still roared with all the grand simplicity of a homely nature.

"But how did it happen?" said Mrs. Verulam.

"One of the servants did it," said the Duchess, sending her eye among the menials in search of the culprit.

"T't! t't!" said Mr. Rodney, with all the testiness of a man who has failed in the moment of danger; "it is as bad as the gardener. Mr. Lite really should get proper characters with his servants."

The conversation here became general, and so when the Duchess suddenly exclaimed to Mr. Bush, her sonorous outcry was only heard by him.

"Heavens!" she said, "it was a gardener! The gardeners are all waiting at table."

Mr. Bush bounced; he rolled his eyes upon the servants in much confusion.

"They are," continued her Grace; "that creature with the sauce-boat was managing the roller, and that—"

"Hush!" said the paragon in a heavy whisper; "give over!"

"Why? They—"

"Give over, I tell yer!" Mr. Bush repeated, with an assumption of portentous mystery.

Dominated by his manhood, her Grace gave over, and whispered:

"What is it?"

The paragon, with gestures of secrecy such as might well have attracted the attention of a universe, impended over her, and mumbled into her ear:

"They ain't gardeners."

"What! They are really footmen? Then why do they dig, and—"

"They ain't footmen."

"Not footmen! Then what sort of servants are they?"

"They ain't servants. Give over! Don't talk so loud," said Mr. Bush, talking very loud himself.

Her Grace was now growing alarmed, but she endeavoured to force her bass voice to become tenor as she whispered:

"Not servants? Then what are they here for?"

"They're here for us," he rumbled.

"For us?"

"You and me—me and you!"

"Me and you!" said the Duchess, with the accent of petrification.

"Ay, it's a go, ain't it?" And he shook his head at her heavily.

"But what on earth are they? Not—not—" She searched for a possible profession, and could only think of dentists.

"They 're coppers!" he puffed in her ear. "Do n't holler!"

She nearly did, never having been waited upon by anything of the kind before.

"Coppers?" she gasped.

"Policemen!"

"Policemen?"

"A-watching of you and me—detectives! Give over now; here 's one a-comin'."

At this moment, indeed, a detective handed her Grace ice-pudding. She took it as if it was handcuffs, and trembled.

"But who put them to watch us?" she whispered in a hoarse voice.

"It 's his doin'," rejoined the paragon, shovelling his head at the Duke.

"The Duke!"

Mr. Bush leant right over her as he uttered the fearful answer:

"He thinks you and me is a-goin' on together."

At this point the Duchess uttered a note such as proceeds from a thirty-foot organ-pipe, and burst into a heavy swoon.

Now, the Duke had been observing the extraordinary secrecy of the colloquy that preceded the Duchess's seizure, the heavy pantomime of the paragon, and his elaborate efforts to remain unheard. All this, succeeded as it was by her Grace's shout and collapse, and added to the Duke's belief that Mr. Bush was a wicked dog and up to any amount of secret rascality—witness the Lady Drake affair—worked together in the ducal mind, and gave rise to a large number of sudden and terrible suspicions such as had never marred the Southboroughs' married life until this moment. In short, the

Duke believed that Mr. Bush had been whispering soft words into his wife's ear, and that she, overwhelmed with emotion, had uttered her soul in one tremendous and unpremeditated note, and fainted away. He therefore sat considering whether he should at once seize the nearest carving-knife and acquaint Mr. Bush of his surmises, or whether he would be more ingenious if he governed himself for a while and allowed these disgraceful vipers to take their course. While he was working out this problem, the five detectives, Mr. Harrison, and the house-party were taking all possible measures to recover the Duchess from her swoon, which was of the most determined character. Her Grace, never accustomed to do things by halves, for a long time resisted every blandishment that Miss Bindler's wide knowledge of veterinary surgery, Mr. Bush's intimate acquaintance with the sudden illnesses of cattle, and Mr. Ingerstall's violent appreciation of French methods of recovering the drowned could suggest. Indeed, it was only when the groom of the chambers made an application of cold iron, in the form of the Ribton Marches cellar-key, to her person that she struggled feebly, heaved some dozen sighs, and, after requiring to be told where she was in the orthodox manner, sat up and opened her eyes. They fell on the five detectives, and she nearly shrieked again. Indeed, had not Mr. Bush given her a secret but exceedingly powerful shove, there is no saying what course hysteria might not have led her to take. The Duke observed that secret shove, and his veins swelled with the decent fury of the outraged husband. But he controlled himself until the Duchess had been supported to the purple drawing room, accompanied by the other ladies. Then, unable to remain any longer inactive under the insult which he supposed was being offered to

his ancient name and honour, he rather curtly released himself from Mr. Ingerstall, who was just saying, "It is a most extraordinary thing to me that anybody can be found to go to the Royal Academy when the L'Art Nouveau is within a few hours' journey of London," and proceeded to carry out a little plan which he had formed in his head. This plan led him to call a footman, which he did in the baronial hall, at present deserted. A very thin man, with a gray face and small eyes like marbles, responded to his summons. The Duke assumed an affable air:

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Bliggins, sir," was the rather unexpected reply.

The Duke found it decidedly curious. The man gave his surname and did not say "Grace." However, these were petty details in this stress of terrible circumstance.

"Very well, Bliggins," said the Duke. "Can you keep a quiet tongue in your head?"

He chanced to show the gleam of a sovereign under the electric light—Bliggins may have noticed it. At any rate, he suddenly looked very hungry, and replied:

"I can be dumb, sir, when necessary."

"How nice to command infirmities at will!" said the Duke. "You do n't go blind when you go dumb, eh?"

"I can prevent it, sir, if I try hard," responded Bliggins.

"Do you know which of the gentlemen here is Mr. James Bush?" said the Duke, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"Ain't he the thin gent as Smithers set to and soaked this afternoon, sir?" murmured Bliggins.

The Duke jumped, and casting a searching glance upon Bliggins was suddenly aware that he was the self-conscious gardener who had been behaving with levity

among the sunflowers in the afternoon. His Grace bit his moustache and pulled his pantaloons' beard. This fact certainly complicated the situation.

"H'm!" he muttered.

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Can you serve two masters, Mr. Bliggins?" asked the Duke.

"I can, sir," replied Bliggins, again looking very hungry—"if I'm paid in a proper manner for so doing, as you might say."

The Duke suddenly made up his mind.

"Very well," he said. "First let me say I know you; you're a detective, and you've been put here to watch me. Be quiet, man! I ought to know a third-rate detective by this time, considering that for five-and-forty years— But that is no matter. Lord Arthur Kempton's your employer, no doubt, or Sir John Milton. Hold your tongue; I've no time to hear your lies! Watch me as much as you like, but"—here his Grace let Mr. Bliggins feel the sovereign—"keep an eye on the gentleman with the red beard and—"

"Him as pulled the cutlet off the lady as Wilker dropped on her?"

"The very man—watch him!"

"I will, sir."

"Day and night."

"The charge for night duty—"

The Duke allowed the self-conscious gardener to feel a second sovereign.

"I will, sir, day and night."

"Now go away and get dumb," said his Grace, returning softly to the cedar-wood parlour.

As things did not seem very lively that evening in the purple drawing-room, Mrs. Verulam sent for the

powdered Frederick, and told him to set the orchestration going. This order quickly produced Mr. Harrison, in a state of mania.

"The employment of the instrument, ma'am, is against Mrs. Lite's orders, oh, most certainly!" he exclaimed in great excitement.

Mrs. Verulam turned to Mr. Rodney.

"Will you please send him away?" she murmured. "I cannot bear this sort of thing to-night."

Mr. Rodney, whose nervous system was in tatters owing to the combination of misfortunes through which he had recently passed, faced round on Mr. Harrison like a hyena.

"Be off with you!" he cried, in a piercing manner. "If you dare to argue with me, I'll—I'll—"

He seized a small wooden paper-knife, and the groom of the chambers made an exit that called forth the critical approval of Miss Bindler.

"For an old man, he's in good training," she remarked. "I believe he could still do a mile in under the ten minutes!"

The orchestration began to deal vigorously with "*Cavalleria Rusticana*," and under cover of the music the company made various attempts to bring off what Miss Bindler would have called "events." Lady Drake, for instance, sidled up to the Duke, determined to lead up to her continued respectability, and Chloe was on the look-out for the chance of a quiet moment with Mrs. Verulam. But this moment she could not secure, on account of the tiresome behaviour of the Duchess, who was now in the irritable stage of incipient convalescence, and was throned on a purple armchair at Mrs. Verulam's side. Her Grace's horror at the revelation of James Bush, her amazement that her husband should suspect her

of unchristian flirtation with a man bred up among bees, drove her into a fit of temper which she proceeded to vent against her hostess. The suspected respectable woman determined to take it out of the woman whom she believed to be what Martha Sage affirmed "a baggage, my dear, an arrant little baggage!" She began by making several ostentatious double chins at Mrs. Verulam, who received the attention with calmness. Then, growing exhausted with this physical exercise, for which she was a little out of training, she resolved to put her vexed and suspected soul into language.

"I have known you for a long time, Mrs. Verulam," she began; "I remember you as a toddler."

"Thank you!"

"Not everyone can say as much."

"I dare say not. No."

"Those were innocent days," continued the Duchess, with an attempt at pathos that resembled the efforts of a partially imaginative elephant to become a fairy.

"Yes, toddlers are generally innocent, I suppose."

"Innocent and open-hearted."

"Yes. They wear their hearts on their frills, do n't they?"

"In after-life it is different."

"What a pity!"

"The respectability of childhood becomes impaired."

"Does it?"

"Does it not?"

And here the Duchess stared hard, first at Mrs. Verulam, then at Chloe, and then again at Mrs. Verulam, who sweetly smiled.

"I do n't know."

"I should have thought you did," said the Duchess, beginning to bring up her heavy artillery.

"Why?"

The orchestrion was preparing for the "Intermezzo." The Duchess was preparing for conflict, rendered reckless by the self-conscious gardeners, the cutlet and the swoon. If she was to be wrongly suspected of levity, she would at least take it out of this wicked little person whom she had known as a toddler.

"Let me give you a piece of advice," she began, with sonorous subtlety.

"With pleasure."

"Get rid of Mr. Van Adam. I speak as a true friend."

And her Grace, purple with true friendship as the furniture on which she sat, made a really successful double chin, and paused for a reply.

"Why should I get rid of him?" asked Mrs. Verulam, making an angel's face at the double chin.

"There are many reasons," said the Duchess, with growing fury.

"I know of none. Poor boy! He needs me in his loneliness." And she shot a tender glance at Chloe.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the Duchess. "Gracious heavens!"

"We ought to be kind to those whom the world has treated cruelly," Mrs. Verulam continued, with high morality, and a rather episcopal demeanour. "Poor dear, Mr. Van Adam! Poor dear fellow!" And she breathed an effective, though quite gentle sigh.

To say that this sigh extracted a snort from the Duchess would be ridiculous. She expressed her feeling in a blast, suddenly heaved herself out of her chair, announced like a thunder-clap afflicted with the *vibrato*: "I'm very ill! I'm much upset!" and marched out of the purple drawing-room with all the gestures appropriate to an enormous soul in the accesses of acute affliction.

"Shock to the system," observed Miss Bindler. "I had an Arab once, from the Crabbet Park stud; it was like the Duchess—behaved just like that in sudden cold. Give her mustard." And she returned to the "Pink 'un."

"An application of aspic on the left shoulder must be trying," piped Lady Drake.

The Duke said nothing; but as he looked towards Mr. Bush he appeared to be stripped of the tinsel. The pantaloons were merged in the husband. His expression was like the third act of a melodrama.

CHAPTER XV

CUP DAY

"I do so want to tell you something!" Chloe whispered distractedly to Mrs. Verulam as the house-party separated for the night. "Have you read the *World*?"

"No; but I have something to— Oh, good-night, Mr. Rodney; I hope your rheumatic fever will be better in the morning."

"You are very good to say so," Mr. Rodney said, looking at Chloe as Othello used to look at Iago on bad days; "but I am thoroughly prepared for the worst."

And he remained obstinately between them, as if he meant to grow there for a century or two. Chloe clenched her little fists and longed to box with him.

"Good-night, Mr. Bush," said Mrs. Verulam to the paragon.

"Night," he muttered, with a heavy nod.

She hesitated at the foot of the staircase.

"I must tell you—" she began, and paused.

"Eh?"

"I must tell you what an impression your conduct at dinner made upon me."

The paragon, whose wits were slightly sharpened by cowardice, immediately walked to the conclusion that Mrs. Verulam had observed his ostentatious secrecy with the Duchess. He therefore replied:

"Go along with yer! Rubbish! She 's a deal too old!"

Mrs. Verulam, under the impression that her hero was alluding to his gallant conduct with the cutlet, answered softly:

"Yes, indeed! Had you not acted so promptly, who can tell what the result might have been? I honour you for it. Good-night, Mr. Bush;" and she pressed his mighty hand with hers.

"I hope you believe me, Duke?" Lady Drake piped anxiously. "I do assure you that you have been labouring under a totally wrong impression. Mr. Bush is nothing to me."

The Duke bowed and shot a terrible glance at the paragon.

"Mr. Bush is the devil in human form," he muttered.

"Oh, dear!" cried Lady Drake. "Oh! but then, why did Mrs. Verulam invite him for the race-week?"

"Hush!" said the Duke, frowning at her like a tragic actor accustomed to provincial audiences.

She rustled upstairs in great agitation.

Chloe, according to her timid custom, vanished to bed when the women went to their rooms. She feared smoking-room stories. And so the paragon, the Duke, Mr. Rodney, and Mr. Ingerstall sat alone in the amber smoking-room, which adjoined winter garden number 2, in which Mrs. Lite's favourites soundly slept. Mr. Rodney sat for about two minutes looking like a habitually nervous man, who is suddenly confronted with the last day. Then he hastily swallowed about a pint of brandy.

"Hullo, Rodney!" said the Duke. "Turning teetotaler?"

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Rodney, with a distracted demeanour.

"Giving up the drink, I see," continued the Duke,

with a dismal attempt at his usual jocose air. "Sousing yourself in water from the crystal spring."

"I beg your pardon, Duke," said Mr. Rodney, looking deeply hurt and almost on the verge of tears; "the outrage committed upon me this afternoon is scarcely matter for jest. I—I—" He drank another pint of brandy, and muttering something about the "necessity for expelling cold from the system," and the "terrible results following on rheumatic fever," hurried from the room, affecting the gait of an old hedger and ditcher, crippled with that roadside complaint to which he had so feelingly alluded.

The Duke glared at Mr. Bush, and, lighting a cigar, remarked to Mr. Ingerstall that Rodney would have D.T. on the course to-morrow if he did n't take care. Then he seized the *Times*, and buried himself in the advertisement sheets, through which he took stock of the paragon, making a hole with his finger in, "Wanted, a quiet home for a clergyman afflicted with homicidal mania, who is subject to fits, but is High Church, studious, and of a happy disposition."

"Damn it, there 's no absinthe!" cried Mr. Ingerstall. "In Paris one is not deprived of necessities as one is in England. Why do n't I live in Paris?"

He struck a bell. Mr. Bliggins appeared.

"Where the devil 's the absinthe?" cried the artist in his piercing voice.

"Beg pardon, sir," replied Bliggins, ostentatiously indicating to the Duke that he had his eye on Mr. Bush, and was earning his night-duty money.

"Ra-ta-ta! *Dieu de Dieu*, where is the absinthe, man? Have n't I told you night after night that I do n't drink these Scotch and Irish abominations?"

"Certainly not, sir," said Bliggins impudently—"certainly not!"

He had nothing to expect from Mr. Ingerstall; and, besides, he found politeness as difficult an assumption as the pretence of being a retired major-general or a Hungarian count out for a holiday. The astounded caricaturist snatched off his spectacles, wiped them like a conjuring trick, replaced them with a dab, and examined the detective with preternatural scrutiny.

"It 's a gardener!" he shrieked, after a busy pause.

Mr. Bush shuffled in his elbow chair. Mr. Bliggins looked foolish, and the Duke angry.

"A gardener, Ingerstall!" he said hastily. "What nonsense!"

"It is; I observed him this afternoon. I remember his nose like a teapot, his eyes like marbles, his retreating chin and protruding forehead, perfectly. His arms are too long for his body, and his legs too short for his height. He would make an admirable picture—admirable! I remember this being so."

Overwhelmed with this uncompromising eulogy, Mr. Bliggins went off night-duty at the rate of twelve miles an hour, and forgot to shut the door behind him.

"You're a beautiful subject," Mr. Ingerstall cried out after him—"beautiful!"

The Duke began to look vicious.

"You've frightened the fellow," he said. "Why did n't you leave him alone?"

"Leave a monstrosity alone! Leave a human grotesque in ignorance of his superb infirmity!" cried the artist. "I'll draw him this moment."

He followed Bliggins as a bullet follows a bird, caught him in a pantry, caricatured him in seventeen

seconds, and was up in the lemon bedroom enlarging the original to life size before three minutes had fallen into the lap of the past. Meanwhile the Duke and the paragon were left alone among the soda-water bottles. At first they did not speak. The paragon smoked an immense pipe, whose bowl presented a carved effigy of the features of Peter Jackson, the pugilist. The Duke observed him doing so through the homicidal clergyman who wanted a quiet home; but presently his Grace's intent secrecy caused an accident. Endeavouring slightly to enlarge his peep-hole with a cautious finger, he tore a gap through which a circus-rider might have jumped. The paragon gave him a surly glance, which was rewarded with an elaborate smile, for the Duke was resolved to know more before he showed his hand or revealed his suspicions. He laid down the paper and lit a cigar.

"Nice and quiet here," he said conversationally.

Mr. Bush nodded, without removing Peter Jackson from his mouth.

"Nobody about," continued the Duke, with a jocular demeanour.

Mr. Bush shuffled rather uneasily.

"What if there is n't?" he growled.

"I beg your pardon."

"I says, What if there is n't nobody about?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing! I was only thinking what games might be carried on in a big house like this, half empty, at night, without anybody being aware of them."

Mr. Bush goggled his large auburn eyes at the Duke in a manner suggestive of apprehension partially masked by bumpkin impudence.

"Was you?" he replied, in his usual nervous English.

"Midnight revels, eh? What? what? That big hall 's the place for them. Do n't you think so?"

The paragon began to sulk, as was his custom when alarmed or bemuddled. He did not yet grasp the fact that the Duke was hinting at the Lady Drake episode, but he dimly felt that something was going on which he did not understand. So he relaxed his body, wrapped his left hand in his beard, and began to assume the appearance of a potman preparing for heavy slumber. But the Duke did not intend to be baffled by sleep. So he dug the paragon very sharply in the ribs with assumed geniality, and remarked: "You 're a dog!"

"Give over! I ain't a dog!" mumbled the paragon, slightly reassured.

"Yes, you are. I know you! I know all about it!"

Mr. Bush rolled in his seat.

"Lady Drake 's a fine woman," continued the Duke in a rollicking manner—"a damned fine woman!"

He wished to convince himself that the paragon was a rural Don Juan, to which shrewd suspicion Lady Drake had been giving him the lie. Mr. Bush, hearing the name of her ladyship, felt relieved. He had fancied that the Duchess was secretly in question. Now he forced a guffaw and, under the impression that he was being mighty clever, vociferated:

"Lady Drake, she 's all right—go along with yer' She knows a thing or two! She 's as downy as a goat in autumn, she is."

This remarkable comparison convinced the Duke that Lady Drake had perjured herself when she explained away the episode of the previous night. His suspicions of Mr. Bush increased tenfold.

"You like 'em downy, eh?" he said. "You like a crafty one. What?"

"Rather!" said the paragon, nodding his heavy head and rejoicing in his shrewdness. "Rather!"

"Because you're a downy one yourself? I know you!"

And his Grace forced a cackling laugh and trembled with fury. The paragon was delighted with the apparent success of his subtle ruse, and resolved to trick his Grace still further. He therefore endeavoured to look very sly, and rejoined:

"Look after Lady Drake, and she'll look after you."

"And you did look after her in the hall at three o'clock in the morning, Mr. Bush. Ha! ha! ha!" cried the Duke, with a passionate burst of angry laughter. "I saw you both! I saw you! I know all about it!" Under his breath he added bitterly, "I knew she was lying to me! I knew the fellow was a regular demon!"

The paragon was considerably taken aback at first by this revelation. He had no notion that the sugar-plum affair was common property. However, when he at length realized that the Duke must have been on the watch the previous night, he rejoiced still more. Lady Drake had no husband to take vengeance on any man, so Mrs. Verulam's hero gave her away with the most cheerful alacrity. He laid one enormous hand on the Duke's arm, and remarked impressively:

"She's a rascal!"

"Lady Drake?"

The paragon nodded.

"She's a rascal! Set the gardeners on to her! She wants a-watchin'!" And he sank back into his chair, thoroughly convinced that he had most adroitly rescued the Duchess and himself from the unjust suspicions of his Grace.

The Duke took the matter very differently, however. He was now certain that Mr. Bush was a most consum-

mate and polished scoundrel, up to every move on the board, but hiding his address beneath a magnificent impersonation of glum stupidity and heavy lethargy. For instance, how brilliantly this apparent bumpkin was now endeavouring to concentrate suspicion on Lady Drake, doubtless in order that his proceedings with the Duchess might pass unnoticed and unrevengeed. But the Duke was determined to be equal with him. He could play the game, too, against the devil himself. So he smiled, as if in a harlequinade, and said genially:

"You're right. The gardeners should direct their attention to her. Shall I give them a hint to that effect?"

"Ay!" said Mr. Bush. "Ay! set them on to her. She wants a-watchin'!"

And he shook his sides with rumbling chuckles which took him like an earthquake. The Duke got up, trying not to glare at this consummate and exquisitely adroit villain, this monument of evil cleverness.

"I'll take your advice," he said. "I'll set them on to her. Night!" And he was gone, leaving Mr. Bush to his raptures.

In the hall his Grace encountered Bliggins in a condition of apparent prostration.

"Watch that red-bearded scoundrel!" the Duke ejaculated. "Watch him! Never let him from under your eyes, and I'll give you half my for—half a sovereign!"

"But it's the black gent with the specs as is the dangerous one, sir," began Bliggins. "He chased me in the pantry as if I was a rat, and—"

"The red-bearded villain—he's the man! He's the fiend, I tell you! Stalk him! Dog his footsteps! Creep after him! Run him down! You shan't repent it. Hush! not a word."

The Duke retired up the staircase with the steps of a bandit in old-fashioned grand opera, while Mr. Bush went on gaily chuckling to himself in the amber smoking-room.

Cup Day, dawning in an ethereal mist, found Mr. Bliggins wrapped in a pallid slumber in the hall, and Mr. Harrison setting forth to the fishing cottage to confer with the Emperor. The groom of the chambers roused the sleeping detective with a hasty shake.

"Mr. Bliggins, you was hired to watch; oh, indeed!" he said in stern rebuke.

"I was watching, Mr. Harrison, sir," replied the creature, confusing Mr. Harrison's orders with the Duke's. "'The red-bearded man—he's the fiend! Stalk him! Dog his feet! Creep after him!' you says to me. I was doing of it."

"Mr. Bliggins," replied Mr. Harrison, with scathing dignity, "them was no words of mine—oh, dear, no, on no account whatever! My words to you was, 'Watch the lot;' oh, most certainly! Go, Mr. Bliggins, plant yourself in the garden, and do n't let yourself be knowst, according to Mr. Lite's strict orders; oh, indeed!"

The weary detective departed to carry out this horticultural command, and Mr. Harrison proceeded to lay his grim report of the employment of the sacred instrument, etc., before the agitated Emperor, whose passions steadily increased with the lapse of time and the prolongation of exile.

By the post that morning Chloe received a communication from one of the private inquiry agents whom she had directed to give her information as to the proceedings of her ex-husband, if that personage were actually within the British Isles.

"I beg to inform you," it ran, "that a Mr. Huskinson

Van Adam did arrive at Liverpool by the *Arethusa*, but I have not yet been able to discover where he went upon disembarking. I have no doubt, however, that I shall be successful in tracing him within a day or two. Awaiting your further esteemed orders, I am," etc., etc.

Chloe laid this letter down with an unsteady hand. It filled her with a cataract of mingled emotions, one of which surprised her by its happy violence and covered her cheeks with blushes. In the midst of these blushes she caught sight of her trousers, and the vision helped her to pull herself together. She was no longer a woman; she was a man—at any rate for a day or two more. After that the Deluge! After that no more society! No more Duchesses! No more Lady Pearls! Did this knowledge horrify her? Did she feel in it the end of pleasure, the coming of doom? or did she hear faintly the glories of the dream which she had desired, which she had by a wild stroke of audacity achieved, rustling down and away into the darkness like the damp golden leaves of autumn—and hear their rustlings with an abrupt and strange indifference, child of some hidden, furtive, and scarcely acknowledged emotion? Chloe, herself, perhaps, scarcely knew. In either case she pulled up her trousers, assumed a jaunty air, and talked hard all through breakfast—chiefly to the Lady Pearl, of whose presence, however, she was in truth, scarcely aware, being so full of her own situation, which was half-absurd and surely half-tragic. After breakfast she tried with all her might to speak a word alone with Daisy. But both the Duchess of Southborough and Mr. Rodney were on the watch to prevent any such nefarious attempt from succeeding. Her Grace, despite her own trouble with the Duke, whose disgraceful suspicions—although they remained unexpressed in words—

she was increasingly conscious of, was determined to fight her hostess to the death on behalf of the Lady Pearl. Until Mr. Van Adam was actually ravished away to Paris, the Duchess would not confess herself beaten, would not lose all hope. Strung up by unmerited misfortune to the highest pitch of nervous tension and agitated obstinacy, her eyes prominent with mental strain, her large and respectable face rigid with anxiety and outrage, she inflexibly kept at Mrs. Verulam's side. And the more she observed Chloe's obvious manœuvres to be alone with Mrs. Verulam, the more was the Duchess determined to frustrate them. In all her exertions she was backed up by the excellent owner of Mitching Dean.

When a normally peaceful and conventional man is roused, by the hammering blows of Fate, into acute distress and warfare, he is apt to become far more terrific, far more unconventional than any swashbuckler or man of deeds whatever. So it was with Mr. Rodney. Circumstance was gradually working him up into a state of mind compared with which Gehenna is typically joyous and calm. His imaginary rheumatic fever was, on this lovely morning, nowise abated. His anxiety as to the procedure of the Countess of Sage moment by moment increased. His suspicions of Chloe were advancing rapidly, and his enmity against the man from Bungay had attained almost to fury. Also he had had a sleepless night, and Harry, his man, had abraded his skin while shaving him. If his pulse mounted to 102, is it to be wondered at? If he resolved not to leave Mrs. Verulam's side for one single instant during the entire day, shall he be blamed? In vain did Mrs. Verulam endeavour to get rid of him for a second or two. In vain did she try to invent some pretext, to design some

chivalrous duty which must urge his steps from her. He was too sharp to go. And the more ardently she tried, the more ardently did he deny her, opposing his rheumatism to her every suggestion.

"Would you mind fetching my fan, Mr. Rodney? I believe I left it lying on the table in the magenta boudoir."

"Forgive me if I send Harry for it. I can scarcely walk this morning, and the fever seems increasing upon me."

"Dear! dear! Then you must not dream of going to the races."

"The fresh air will do me good."

"I fear not. I am sure you ought to be lapped at once in cotton-wool, and stay in a darkened room with the temperature kept up to at least 80."

"Possibly, but I understand that the supply of cotton-wool which Mr. Lite keeps in his patent machines has given out. Besides, I consider it my duty not to spoil your week by—by—" Here his voice shook with emotion—"giving way to illness; perhaps even to—death."

"Quite right, Mr. Rodney," exclaimed the Duchess. "In this world duty comes first."

And she endeavoured to convey information to him by signs, without being seen by Mrs. Verulam. Mr. Rodney, never having learnt any dumb alphabet, was unable to comprehend her Grace, and was indeed considerably startled by her fleeting grimaces, and tortured movements of the hands and fingers. Politeness, however, compelled him to respond, which he did by alternately nodding and shaking his head in a miserable and despairing manner, such as could scarcely reassure the Duchess or give her comfort.

While this game of cross-purposes was proceeding behind her back, Mrs. Verulam was inventing a new pretext to get rid of Mr. Rodney, in whose absence she hoped to be able to disentangle herself from the Duchess and consult with Chloe.

"Mr. Rodney," she said, with apparent bland solicitude, "I have been thinking that a cooling draught would probably do wonders for you."

"It is most good of you, but I am perfectly cool, I assure you, already. And I have always understood that nothing is more dangerous to the rheumatic than a thorough draught."

"It would be fatal," said the Duchess sonorously, beckoning and frowning at Mr. Rodney with intense animation, "simply fatal. It would carry him off in the twinkling of an eye."

"I meant a drink, Duchess, not a breeze. Marriner could mix it for you, Mr. Rodney."

"You are too kind, but I never take medicine. I prefer to put my trust in Providence and hope for the best."

And he again shook and nodded his head in vague negative and affirmative to the Duchess. Mrs. Verulam was in despair. She shot a last bolt feebly.

"I think even the bishops and clergy would say that we Christians ought to assist the operations of Providence with—with appropriate medicine," she said.

"I always understood that an operation took the place of physic," growled the Duchess, distressed by Mr. Rodney's entire lack of pantomimic talent and comprehension.

Mrs. Verulam did not say more. She saw that she was in prison, and recognised that it was futile at present to attempt to break out.

"I must dress for the races now," she said.

"I'll come up with you," said the Duchess, taking Mrs. Verulam's arm as if in gentle amity, while at the same time she screwed her face at Mr. Rodney, and endeavoured to force his dull comprehension to grasp the simple fact that a frown, one corner of the mouth turned down, a wrinkled nose, and a left hand flapping like a seal must obviously mean, "I'll look after her, but I depend upon you to keep an eye on Mr. Van Adam."

Evidently he was nowhere near it, for his long face looked blank as a white sheet of note-paper as prisoner and gaoler left the room.

All through that weary Cup Day Mr. Rodney was forever in Mrs. Verulam's pocket, emotionally sticking to her in a manner that irritated her till she could have burst into tears. His eyes, usually so indefinite, now blazed with the fires either of rheumatic fever, jealousy, or protection. His voice, usually mellifluous as the twilight murmur of a tideless sea, now rose in harsh intonations, and was set a-trembling by a *vibrato* that might have belonged to a fourth-rate Italian tenor. His wonted soothing demeanour and reassuring Mayfair gait were exchanged for an animation that savoured of delirious sick-beds, and a strut of suspicion on the *qui vive* that might have become a scout compelled to follow his profession on a pavement composed of red-hot needles. The Royal Pen gaped at him, and heard his passionate volubility with unutterable amazement. Again, as on the preceding Tuesday, he was feverishly intent on dodging and inducing Mrs. Verulam to dodge, the venerable Countess of Sage, who, crowned with a gimp helmet, clothed in chain mail of shining bugles, and bedizened with ornaments of black bog-oak, grown on the family estate at Ballybrogganbroth, Ireland, pervaded

the Enclosure on the arm of a Commander-in-Chief, with a Field-Marshal on her further side. But Fate, which was leading him in such slippery places, chose to frustrate his chivalrous purpose. Soon after the second race, while busily engaged in manœuvring Mrs. Verulam away from the neighbourhood of Chloe, who was shooting at her despairing glances demanding an interview, Mr. Rodney ran her and himself into the very arms of Lady Sage, who was energetically airing her views on the recent Crimean campaign, and pointing out certain mistakes in tactics committed by those who were in charge of the British army in the Crimea. They were, in fact, practically impaled upon her bog-oak brooches and necklets before they observed her. Lady Sage paused on the words, "If I had been Lord Raglan, I should certainly have—" stared Mrs. Verulam and the owner of Mitching Dean full in the face for a minute or more, then remarked in a piercing voice to the Field-Marshal, "What extraordinary people manage to get into the Enclosure!" and waddled away, rattling her armour in a most aggressive manner, and tossing the gimp helmet until it positively scintillated in the sunshine.

Mr. Rodney's knees knocked together, and he shut his eyes. The worst had happened. The heavens had fallen. The flood had come again upon the earth, and there was no ark of refuge. His brain was full of buzzings, and he felt as if he was being pricked all over. When at last he opened his eyes and looked at Mrs. Verulam, he perceived that she was rather pale, and that her expression was slightly more set than usual. Yet she seemed calm and cool, while he was hot as fire. Glancing away from her, he beheld the expressive faces of a serried mass of his oldest and most valued friends,

whose lips seemed curling with derision, while their family and ancestral noses were surely tip-tilted with contempt. He clasped his hands together mechanically, and, with a hunted demeanour, turned as if to flee. Vague thoughts of leaving the country, of endeavouring to make a home and get into a fresh set in Buenos Ayres, or of retiring to a hermitage in Iceland, ran through his collapsing mind. There is no saying whether he would not have usurped the place of the Ascot dog, and run yelping down the cleared course to the golden gates, if Mrs. Verulam had not murmured to him in her *voix d'or*:

"Shall we go for a little stroll in the paddock?"

He assented with a bow that was scarcely worthy of a yokel, and led her among the parading horses, getting so entangled with the four legs of the favourite that it seemed as if his one ambition was to become a centaur before evening. After being rescued by a swearing trainer, who addressed him in a long and highly ornate speech, he seemed desirous of immersing Mrs. Verulam in the jockey's dressing-rooms, or of having her incontinently weighed, but she resisted, and at last said:

"Mr. Rodney, your fever makes you act very strangely. I think, perhaps, we had better be going."

"Going—gone!" he muttered, like a second-rate auctioneer.

"Oh, please do try to compose yourself! All the jockeys are looking at you."

"Let them look!" replied Mr. Rodney distractedly. "Let all the jockeys in Christendom look! What does it matter now?"

And he stared wildly about, as if searching for sack-cloth and ashes.

Mrs. Verulam flushed.

"Mr. Rodney," she said, and her voice, too, began

to tremble, "I must beg you to find the carriage for me at once."

"But it will not be here until half-past four."

"Very well, then, I shall walk home."

"Walk!" he cried, in as much amazement as if she had suggested going home in a balloon.

"Yes, and you must please accompany me."

"Certainly! anything! anywhere! What can it matter now?"

In after years that walk often rose before the owner of Mitching Dean in a vision of dust and anguish. As they went stumbling among the vulgar crowd, treading on nuts, elbowing donkeys and negro minstrels aside, it seemed to Mr. Rodney that he and Mrs. Verulam were as a modern Adam and Eve, being expelled by a master of the buckhounds with a flaming hunting crop from that garden of the social paradise, the royal Enclosure. They did not speak as they surged forward in quest of the far-off palace of the Bun Emperor. What could they say? Criminals do not chatter merrily as they wend their way towards the hulks. So Mr. Rodney put it to himself, although he had not the slightest idea what the hulks were. Only when, after long wandering in dreadful lanes between hedges totally unknown in society, they reached Ribton Marches, footsore, travel-stained, and broken in spirit, did he find a tongue, and, turning towards his wretched companion, make this cheery remark: "All is over!"

"Please do n't talk nonsense, Mr. Rodney," said Mrs. Verulam, sharply, as she sank into a garden-chair.

"I repeat," he answered, with thrilling emphasis and in a voice that was exceedingly hoarse, "all is over!"

Mrs. Verulam bit her lips, and looked very much as if she wanted to burst out crying.

"There is no hope," he went on. "There is no light anywhere. All is darkness."

The sun was pouring down its golden beams, but no matter.

"It is strange," Mr. Rodney pursued, staring very hard at nothing with glazed eyes. "It is strange to think that two lives, at one time happy, peaceful, even honoured, can be broken up in an instant, and turned to dust and ashes in the twinkling of an eye!"

"My life is not turned to dust and ashes in the twinkling of— Oh, do please say something more cheerful!"

"Cheerful!" cried the owner of Mitching Dean in hollow tones—"cheerful!"

And he gave vent to several very distressing groans. Mrs. Verulam leaned back and shut her eyes. Fatigue and excessive heat, combined with unexpected groans, may well break even the proudest spirit. Had Mr. Bush been at hand to inspire confidence, and to impersonate the true, grand life, Mrs. Verulam might possibly have plucked up courage. As it was, she felt very miserable, and was devoured with a longing to give the Countess of Sage into the hands of Chinese torturers, whom she had read of in a book of travels as exquisitely expert in their trade. After a quarter of an hour's pause, partially filled in by Mr. Rodney's exclamations of unutterable despair, she made a great effort to compose herself, and remarked bravely:

"This is what I have wished for."

Mr. Rodney punctuated the sentence with a piteous outcry.

"This," continued Mrs. Verulam, "has been my dream. For this I have worked and striven, toiled and—" she had nearly said "moiled," but at the last

minute substituted "prayed," which certainly raised the speech on to a higher plane of oratory. "I ought, therefore, to be thankful," she resumed, the corners of her pretty mouth turning downward, "and I am."

Mr. Rodney looked at her mournfully.

"It is terrible to see the approach of madness," he remarked, gazing upon her eventually with a weird and flickering curiosity.

"I am not going mad," said Mrs. Verulam.

"I beg your pardon," he rejoined—"I beg your pardon. You may not—in fact, you evidently do not know it; but, indeed, you are."

"Really, Mr. Rodney, I think I may be allowed to know my own condition."

"They never do. It is one of the regular symptoms. You will find it in all the medical books."

And once more he observed her with agonized curiosity.

Mrs. Verulam, perhaps not unnaturally, began to grow very angry.

"Medical books," she said, in a flushed voice, "are not only disgusting, but deceptive. I must really request you to believe me."

"I am sorry, I am very sorry, that I cannot. We must all learn to look madness bravely in the face," he replied, staring perfectly straight at her.

Mrs. Verulam made a sudden movement as though to slap him, restrained herself, puckered her face, drummed her little feet violently in mid-air, and was about to burst into a flood of wrathful tears when the powdered Frederick was seen approaching across the lawn, bearing a gold salver which twinkled and glinted in the sun.

"A telegram for you, ma'am," he said.

Mrs. Verulam took it from him hysterically, tore it open, and read: "Huskinson Van Adam is somewhere in Berkshire—just discovered—Yillick."

"I hope it is no bad news," said Mr. Rodney, as if he felt certain that it announced either plague or strangling.

"It is to say that they have discovered Yillick," answered Mrs. Verulam, in an unemotional voice.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I say they have discovered Yillick," she cried irritably.

"Indeed! What is that?"

"I do n't know. One can't know everything."

"True, true!"

She glanced again at the telegram, recovering herself enough to begin to wonder what it really meant, and why they hurried to inform her of this, the newest discovery of modern times. Happening to see the envelope, she now perceived that it was addressed to "Van Adam, Esq." Evidently the wire was for Chloe. But then why did—? At this instant voices became audible, and the house-party trooped with determination across the lawn.

CHAPTER XVI

CUP NIGHT

Mrs. Verulam immediately held out the telegram to Chloe.

"They have discovered Yillick," she murmured abstractedly.

"What?" said the Duchess, who was very red in the face. "Yillick, do you say?"

Chloe took the telegram eagerly, and turned exceedingly pale.

"Is a Yillick an animal?" said the Lady Pearl softly to her.

"No, no; only a—a friend; at least, a sort of acquaintance of mine," Chloe stammered.

As a matter of fact, Yillick was the surname of the Private Inquiry Agent who was looking out for Huskinson.

"You left very early, Mrs. Verulam," said the Duchess sternly.

"I was tired. The heat was so great."

"I did not think so. And I am very susceptible to heat. How did you get home?"

"I walked."

"Good gracious! What made you do that?"

"I like exercise."

"When you are tired? When you feel the heat so much? How very strange!"

And her Grace, who knew all about the Martha Sage affair, which had been much cackled of in the Enclosure, glowered heavily at her hostess, whom she, too, intended to cut at the end of the week, when the fate of the Lady Pearl had been finally decided for good or evil.

"Did you meet Lady Sage?" she pursued mercilessly, while Mr. Rodney endeavoured to look at ease, and succeeded in looking like a constitutionally timid person being led out to the stake.

"Oh, yes," answered Mrs. Verulam, with an effort after indifference.

"Well?" remarked the Duchess, after a short and solemn pause.

"Well!" retorted Mrs. Verulam.

"Did you like her gown?" said the Duchess, getting a little confused, and becoming inept.

"I dare say it was all right, but personally I am not particularly fond of gimp and bugles, nor do I care specially for oak ornaments in the day-time," returned Mrs. Verulam, with veiled, but bitter sarcasm.

"Oh! Still, in these hard times, it is a great saving of expense to be able to grow one's jewellery on one's own land," said the Duchess turning away, and feeling that she was beginning to get the worst of it. She met the stare of her husband and blenched, suddenly remembering that she, too, though always so firmly innocent, had her troubles and was born to suffering. But she little knew what a terrible course those troubles were about to take, into what a maelstrom of unmerited misfortune she was about to plunge.

"Daisy, I simply must speak to— Oh, certainly, Lady Pearl, I shall be delighted to show you the orchid house," cried the distracted Chloe after tea.

It seemed that she was never to be allowed to unbur-

den her overcharged heart to her friend, who was now clawed by her Grace and the despairing Mr. Rodney, while Chloe was obliged to escort the languishing gout-patient through endless avenues of plants.

Night fell, and with it the weather changed. A small, fine rain began to rustle among the shrubs around the palace, the moon was obscured by ragged and slowly floating clouds, and an uncomfortable and undersized wind, indefinite of purpose, sluggishly moved about the garden, fingering the trees and flowers as if uncertain whether to be violent or go away altogether. Of course, curtains were drawn within the palace, the electric moons gleamed, the parrots were softly illuminated, and nobody was supposed to know what the night was about. Nevertheless, the subtle influence of weather was apparent among the house-party. Everybody seemed to be superlatively glum. Miss Bindler had lost forty pounds over Bound-to-Win, and was considering whether she would have to put down her bike at the end of the week. Mr. Ingerstall, having taken her tip, was also a loser, and was consequently speechless and black with irritated despair. Chloe was in a strange condition of mingled apprehension and excitement, and as she could find no opportunity of unburdening herself to Mrs. Verulam, and could not fix her mind on ordinary matters, she did not talk at all, and made no response to the murmurings of the Lady Pearl. The Lady Pearl, therefore, plunged into abysses of despair, and the Duchess, observant of her daughter's header, and greatly exercised about the Duke and the detectives—who were again waiting at table—became plethoric and mum.

Mr. Rodney was in a state of absolute collapse. He ate nothing, said nothing, and looked like a man who might do anything, from throwing himself out of a win-

dow to murdering all those within his reach. The Sage affair had totally disorganized him. He was no longer himself; he was no longer a really responsible being.

The Duke divided his time between glowering at the Duchess and the paragon, and carrying on a secret pantomime with Mr. Bliggins, who returned affirmative gestures to every face that was made at him, nodding "Yes" with a lobster salad, implying that the red-bearded scoundrel was under his observation with a dozen of oysters, or hinting at an increase of his night-duty salary with a rum-omelette.

Lady Drake ate enormously, and looked grievous.

As to Mr. Bush—although he was reassured about the Duke, who had doubtless been fed into calm by receiving Lady Drake's reputation to gnaw—he was sulky, not from any special reason, but because he nearly always was.

There remained Mrs. Verulam. What of her? She should have been happy, for her plot had been successful. Chloe's transformation from woman to man had opened the cage-door to the squirrel. Society, which had for so long defied the lovely widow's attempts to get out of it, would now doubtless follow the lead of Lady Sage and bid her go. She was compromised, and yet retained completely her own secret self-respect—her knowledge that she had done no wrong. Why, then, should she feel guilty? Why should she tingle with something that was surely shame? Why should she grow red under the angry eye of the Duchess? Probably because she was more sensitive than she had imagined; because she had that trying sort of soul which inevitably feels ashamed if it is believed to be shameful. All through dinner Mrs. Verulam sat deep in distressed thought, immersed in consideration of the present and

solicitude for the future. If only she could have a good talk with Chloe, she felt that her burden would be lightened. They must meet somehow; they must draw up some plan of campaign. Mrs. Verulam had not yet seen the *World*, and Mr. Rodney, buffeted and afflicted sore by Providence, had forgotten to tell her of the Van Adam paragraph. She did not know of the real Huskinson's probable presence in Berkshire at this very moment, for she had not grasped the meaning of the Yillick communication. But she had heard Lord Bernard Roche's news, and supposed the orange-grower to be on his way. Chloe would have to disappear; her work was done; she had been successful, it seemed, in ruining Mrs. Verulam's reputation. Thinking this, Mrs. Verulam strove to rejoice, and wanted to cry. To nerve herself, she gazed upon the paragon's enormous bulk and calm and gluttonous lethargy. She lost herself in his streaming auburn mane, seeking comfort and sustaining power. The cage-door was open; the squirrel could leave its prison. Where should it go? Surely to Bungay Marshes, Lisborough. There must be other cottages there besides the Farm—other abodes of peace round which the bees hummed and the sheep bleated in tender tunefulness. Thither must she go, like some white dove seeking an ark of refuge. Thither must she flee, and be at rest. But she and Chloe must first hold a long consultation, concert proper measures for the eternal concealment from society of the audacious manner in which it had been tricked and imposed upon. How to do that? How to get rid of the Duchess and the now frantic and unconventional owner of Mitching Dean? Marriner—that faithful wretch! She must convey a missive to Chloe; a meeting must be arranged in the dead of night, when all the house-party slept. In the darkness the

finale of this history must be devised. It must be settled when Chloe should disappear, how and where. Mrs. Verulam's future must be discussed. To-night—Mariner—Chloe—Fate.

Dinner was over. As in a dream, Mrs. Verulam accompanied the ladies to the purple drawing-room. All things seemed to her vague and unreal, except the hideous vision of the Countess of Sage, stiff with gimp and fury, insulting the pet of the gay world, ringing the knell of her butterfly life of pleasure. She sat down on a sofa, and began vehemently to think of the pale perfection of a Bungay existence superintended by her idea of Agag.

The Duchess watched her from a distance. Being in a condition of acute suspicion, her Grace gravely distrusted the concentrated abstraction of her hostess. No doubt Mrs. Verulam was laying some fresh and horrible plot against the happiness of the Lady Pearl. It must be frustrated, whatever it was.

"Mother," said the Lady Pearl at this moment.

"My darling! my only child!" replied the Duchess, in her deepest bass.

"I think Mr. Van Adam has something on his mind."

The Duchess started, and surveyed her daughter with protruding eyes.

"What makes you think so, my beautiful Pearl?" she queried.

"He never spoke to me all through dinner, and he kept on looking towards Mrs. Verulam. I think the world is full of misery."

"Gout, my beloved one, gout! Carlsbad would make you think very differently," replied the Duchess, according to her rule. But she spoke without conviction; and the Lady Pearl did not think it necessary to protest,

as usual, that her mental condition was governed by the soul rather than by the body.

Heavily the rainy evening wore on. The statement of the Lady Pearl had added to the Duchess's conviction that some deep-laid plot was brewing between Mrs. Verulam and Chloe. Her Grace's knowledge of the world taught her that Mrs. Verulam must, in all probability, be a desperate woman to-night. For had she not been whipped by the Countess of Sage in the eyes of the whole world? And let a woman be reckless and wicked as Messalina, her first public scourging does not leave her unmoved; but, on the other hand, it probably does leave her defiant, careless of consequences, ready for any fierce and wild adventure. Was not, perhaps, some fierce and wild adventure afoot to-night? The Duchess felt like a regiment of sentries as she sat brooding by the silent orchestrion, her eyes fixed so furiously on Mrs. Verulam that that wicked little baggage seemed set in mist—seemed blurred as the shining disc is blurred to the subject being hypnotized.

Only when the men came in from the dining-room, and she met again the furtive eyes of her husband, did the Duchess feel painfully that over the watch-dog paradoxically a watch was set.

That night the women went to their rooms early. As good-nights were being exchanged, Chloe and Mrs. Verulam made one last agonized attempt to take part in a quiet whisper. But the Duchess pounced on Mrs. Verulam, Mr. Rodney leapt to Chloe's side, and the whisper died almost ere it was born. Mrs. Verulam ascended the staircase in a somewhat despairing manner, throwing an occasional glance down into the hall, in which Mr. Bliggins and other detectives were arranging various silver spirit-bottles, gold cigar-boxes, malachite

ash-trays, and other male paraphernalia. For Mr. Rodney, now in a nervous fever which rendered him entirely reckless of conventionalities and consequences, had suddenly informed Mr. Harrison that the baronial hall must accommodate the smokers that night, his object being to occupy a post of vantage in the very centre of the palace, so that he might be on the spot to prevent any surreptitious conduct on Mrs. Verulam's part. He regarded her now very strangely as a socially ruined lunatic, whom yet he adored in a frenzied and unutterable manner. And he was becoming madly, feverishly jealous. Mrs. Verulam's apparent indifference to the appalling incident which had taken place that afternoon in the Enclosure convinced him that she was off her head, but his throbbing heart forced him to the terrible conclusion that it was a crazy passion for the supposed orange-grower which had made her so. For his sake she defied the world; for love of him she lay down in public at a race meeting and let the old Countess of Sage go trampling over her. Chloe had bewitched her; but Chloe should not escape his surveillance to-night. On that Mr. Rodney was passionately determined. When, therefore, Chloe endeavoured as usual, to slip away in the wake of the ladies, Mr. Rodney bounded up with the activity of a panther, and placed himself before her in a jungle attitude.

"You are not going already, Van Adam!" he cried—"so early! Why, it is only about nine o'clock."

It was really a quarter to eleven.

Chloe yawned.

"I'm dead beat," she began.

"Then a smoke will do you good. You must have a cigar—you must—"

And he laid hold of her arm with a pretended cordi-

ality, which his twisted and wrinkled face belied. Chloe stood still and looked at him. She wanted terribly to get away and, by some stratagem, obtain an interview with Mrs. Verulam; at the same time, she did not wish to rouse any suspicion of her desire. She perceived that the owner of Mitching Dean was painfully excited: the veins stood out on his narrow forehead, his thin hands fluttered like a bird's wings, his moustache seemed to bristle with suspicion, and he stared at her like all Scotland Yard at a malefactor. This convulsed effigy made such an impression upon her that she took her foot from the staircase reluctantly and came back with him to the spirit-bottles, where the Duke was mixing himself a drink, while Mr. Ingerstall fumed in an armchair over a cigarette sent from a Parisian tobacconist, and Mr. Bush poured volumes of smoke out of Peter Jackson.

"A drink, my dear Van Adam," cried Mr. Rodney, in a very theatrical manner—"a long drink, a strong drink, and a drink all together."

He was trying to be hilarious, without knowing the way to do it. The Duke turned round.

"Hullo!" he said. "Van Adam sitting up! Bravo! Have a weed?"

He extended a mighty cigar-case. Chloe meekly rifled it, wondering what would happen next.

"Have a light?" said his Grace, striking one on his trousers, like Chirgwin, the White-eyed Kaffir.

"Thanks," said Chloe.

"Not that end, my son."

"Oh, I was n't thinking!"

"You have n't pinched the end off. That's better. What? Won't it draw?"

"No; I do n't think it will. I'll—I think I'll have a cigarette, thanks."

"That 's a damned good cigar."

"Splendid! Still, I think after all I will have a cigarette."

"A pipe 's the thing," rumbled the paragon—"a pipe and a fistful of Bristol Bird's-eye."

"Oh, no, thanks; not a pipe!" cried Chloe, hastily seizing a cigarette, which she understood the management of. "That 's all right."

"Come and sit here," said the Duke, beckoning her to a divan.

He intended to use her as a stalking-horse, and to lull to sleep any suspicion which the paragon might have that he was being watched.

Chloe came to the divan puffing at her cigarette. Mr. Rodney frantically followed, and placed himself erect on a very small upright cane-chair. He was smoking an unlighted cigar, which he occasionally removed from his white lips, in order that he might blow rings of imaginary smoke into the air. The Duke strove to seem larky and at ease.

"Now the women are gone we can say what we like, eh?" he began.

"Yes," faltered Chloe; "we can say what we like now."

"A very good cigar, this," cried Mr. Rodney, with a jaunty air, that sat as naturally upon him as a matinée hat on the head of a major-general.

"I dare say it is—when it 's lighted," said the Duke, with a prolonged snigger.

Mr. Rodney got violently red, and lit eight or ten matches all at the same time.

"Well done, Rodney! Set the place on fire!" cried the Duke. "What the deuce is that?"

It was merely the noise made by Mr. Harrison as he

raced to the telephone to acquaint the Bun Emperor that Mr. Rodney was at present engaged in igniting the palace. Concealed among the pedals of the organ, the groom of the chambers had been doing detective duty.

"It sounded like athletic sports on an oil-cloth," continued the Duke, while Mr. Rodney held his cigar in match flames till it glowed like a furnace. "Well, as I was saying, now we can say what we like. Tell us a good story, Rodney—one of your rorty ones."

Mr. Rodney shrivelled.

"I fear," he murmured—"I fear I am scarcely in the—er—rorty vein to-night. To-morrow—the next day—perhaps—"

"Well, then, you tip us one, Van Adam. Give us some of your Florida experiences among the orange-girls. What? Go ahead!"

Thus adjured, Chloe said:

"Some of the girls in Florida do such lovely needlework, you have no idea."

The Duke raised one eyebrow to a level with his side parting.

"Lovely needlework! That's a funny beginning for a Pink un. Well?"

"Yes; but they do indeed. They sit all day in the sun and—"

"Damned silly girls! Spoil their complexions! They should go into the shade, eh! What—what?"

"I knew a grisette once who lived on a fourth floor in the Rue des Martyres," began Mr. Ingerstall in the distance; but nobody heeded him, and he relapsed passionately into his former moody silence.

"They sit in the sun and work hard for their living," continued Chloe, trying to look rakish without losing self-respect.

"Deuced tiresome to keep on working hard for one's living in the sun, eh, Rodney?" cried his Grace.

"I confess I should prefer to be under the trees, Duke—I confess that frankly," said the owner of Mitching Dean, with unnecessary earnestness.

"Well, go on, Van Adam," said the Duke, expectant of some spicy development in this apparently unpromising plot—"they work for their living in the sun. Well?"

"Well—er—well, that's all," said Chloe, rather crestfallen.

The Duke's jaw fell several inches.

"All! Oh, come, I say, hang it, you're pulling all our legs!"

"Pulling all your—oh, indeed, I'm not! Why should I do such a thing? I do assure you, Duke—"

"But hang it, your story 'd do for a school treat or a grandmothers' meeting. That's not the sort of thing Rodney cares for—eh, Rodney?" and his Grace was good enough to dig the owner of Mitching Dean in his eminently respectable ribs. Mr. Rodney started, and broke the frail back of the small chair on which he was sitting. "Smashing up the furniture now, after trying to set the whole place on fire," cried the Duke, just as Mr. Harrison was in course of stealing back cautiously to his lair among the organ-pedals.

The groom of the chambers heard the sentence with bristling horror, and immediately made off once more to the telephone, through which he proceeded to deliver the following remarks to the fishing cottage:

"After setting fire to the 'ouse—oh, most decidedly, sir!—Mr. Rodney is now smashing up of Mrs. Lite's own particular chairs—oh, indeed! And the Duke, ma'am, is splitting his sides with laughture while he done it. I am keeping an eye on him according to your

instructions, sir, and to my latest breath will do so, though what will become of us all, ma'am, is more than anyone can say—oh, indeed, I do assure you on every account whatever!"

On hearing this peaceful catalogue of facts, the Emperor and Empress engaged Mr. Harrison in animated conversation for the space of perhaps an hour and a half, during which time events were moving forward in the palace with some rapidity. In answer to the Duke, Mr. Rodney forced a ghastly smile, and answered hoarsely:

"An accident! merely an unlucky accident, Duke! I shall make it good to Mr. Lite."

"If you do n't he 'll probably skin you," said his Grace. "He 's so tetchy."

"Oh, really," rejoined Mr. Rodney, looking much upset—"really, I should not submit for a moment to any indignity of that nature."

"Well, I dare say even a moment of being flayed would inconvenience a chap. But come, give us a Limerick. Cheer us up now! Give us a good Limerick. You must know thousands."

"I assure you I do not. I have never been in Ireland."

The Duke burst out into a mirthless laugh.

"Well, upon my—what 's Ireland got to do with it?"

"Everything, I should suppose," returned Mr. Rodney, trembling with nervous exhaustion, but trying to look dignified. "Where are you going, Van Adam?"

"Bed," said Chloe, endeavouring to vanish.

"Bed be damned!" remarked the Duke. "I never saw such fellows for a carouse. Bed at ten!"

"It is past eleven," said Chloe uncomfortably, while Mr. Rodney looked eaten up with suspicion.

"Well, what if it is?" exclaimed the Duke. "Does America go to bed at seven?"

"Oh, I do n't say that—"

"I should imagine not. Anyone would think we were a lot of damned old women. Here, pour some whisky down your throat and look jolly."

Chloe obeyed the first command, but not the second. Mr. Ingerstall, at this point in the carouse, bounced up from his chair, muttered some French oaths, and suddenly tore upstairs.

"There 's another cheery soul!" said the Duke, after him. "We might as well be Sunday-school teachers at a Methodist funeral at once."

He was proceeding to various other comparisons of a like innocent and respectable nature, when the air was rent by an exceeding loud uproar. Mr. Rodney caught hold of the sides of his chair and cried, "What 's that?"

The Duke looked hastily at the organ, and Chloe apprehensively at the ceiling. The uproar was repeated, and then they became aware that it came from the nose of the paragon, and signified that he was resting.

"Oh, it 's only Mr.—it 's only Bush asleep," said Chloe.

"Asleep!" said the Duke, with a bitter sneer.

He felt convinced that the paragon's snores were merely a blind to deceive a doting husband. The demon in human form was doubtless wide awake, perhaps conceiving some diabolical plot beneath this theatrical travesty of the gentle music of slumber.

"He sleeps very loud," said Mr. Rodney—"for decent society."

"He does sleep very loud," said the Duke. Then, lowering his voice, he hummed into Mr. Rodney's ear: "Does anything occur to you, Rodney?"

"I beg your pardon, Duke?" said Mr. Rodney.

"I say, does anything occur to you with regard to it?"

"With regard to what?"

"This damned uproarious sleep?"

"No," said Mr. Rodney. "Nothing at all. Why, what should occur to me?"

"Oh, Lord! I do n't know," said the Duke, with keen irritation and contempt. "I do n't know."

He released the owner of Mitching Dean, and, looking round, exclaimed: "Why, where the deuce is Van Adam?"

Mr. Rodney gazed wildly in every conceivable direction.

"He 's gone!" he cried on a piercing note. "He 's—"

In his turn he bent down to the Duke and whispered excitedly, "Does anything occur to *you*, Duke?"

"Eh?"

"I say, does anything occur to you?"

And Mr. Rodney crouched over him, looking far more surreptitious and knowing than Guy Fawkes.

"What about?"

"About Van Adam's sudden going to bed in this strange manner?" whispered Mr. Rodney.

"No, except that he 's like some damned old woman. What should occur?"

"Oh, dear, nothing, nothing at all!" cried Mr. Rodney petulantly. "I—I— Good-night!"

And he suddenly hastened upstairs four steps at a time, displaying the activity of a wild-cat and the excitement of a van-load of monkeys.

"Well, of all the snivelling, psalm-singing nonconformist, Salvation Army sets of fellows that I ever met in my life," said the Duke irrelevantly, "this one takes the—"

He paused, and sat for a moment listening to the wild symphony of the paragon, who was sunk deep in his arm-chair with his huge head plunged upon his chest.

"That fellow 's as broad awake as I am," muttered the Duke to himself, "and broader! But I 'll be even with him, crafty as he is!"

He got up softly, went to the swing-door that led to the detectives' quarters, put his head through it and hissed, "Bliggins!"

Bliggins appeared, wiping curry, trifle and champagne from his startled features. The Duke beckoned to him and jerked his chin upwards.

Bliggins approached, assuming his hungry look.

"D' you hear that?" the Duke whispered.

"Which, sir?"

"Which! I told you to be dumb, not deaf! Which! That!"

The paragon snored.

"Yes, sir. Which of 'em is playing the organ, sir?"

"The organ, you fool! It 's the red-bearded villain pretending to be asleep."

"He pretends awful noisy, sir!"

"Yes; he overdoes it. He 's no artist, deep as he is. Now, listen to me. Go and turn out the lights. Then come back here and watch. If he stops snoring, crawl up the back-stairs to the chocolate room, and let me know immediately. You understand?"

"I do, sir."

"Very well, not a word."

The Duke retreated up the main staircase on tiptoe, while Mr. Bliggins proceeded to turn out the lights, and leave the paragon in total darkness.

Although night is the time for sleep, and is usually, in country places, dedicated to that delightful occupa-

tion, circumstances induced a good many people to sit up in the palace during the hours of darkness, to listen with a strained attention for any nocturnal sound. Mr. Harrison, as we know, was busy at the telephone, explaining to his Emperor that the palace was being set on fire, and the furniture reduced to matchwood by the owner of Mitching Dean. Mr. Bliggins crouched like a tiger behind the swing-door, solacing himself with a parcel of curry which he had hastily ravished from the detectives' supper-table, and wrapped in a sheet of brown paper convenient for the pocket. The Duke sat with his ear to the keyhole of the chocolate bedroom. The Duchess, who was located in the gray bedroom, was on the alert in a majestic early Victorian dressing-gown with her hair in curl-papers, to which she still faithfully adhered despite the changing fashions of an age of tongs and pins. Her Grace was determined that Mrs. Verulam should make no expedition, hold no colloquy with the orange-grower unobserved, uninterrupted. Mrs. Verulam was frantically writing a note to Chloe, while the faithful Marriner stood by ready to convey it with all speed and caution to that deception's apartment. As to Mr. Rodney, he had turned out all the lights in his room, set the door ajar, and removed his pumps, and now sat in his slippers feet and dense darkness waiting for he knew not what. Only he was confident that something was up, that Mrs. Verulam and Chloe were desirous of communicating with each other, and that they would probably endeavour to do so under cover of night.

Upon the cupolas of the palace, meanwhile, the rain dripped steadily, and in the mighty hall below the paragon snored on, as the Duke supposed, in violently pretended slumber. Soon after Chloe had gained her

room, Mr. Rodney heard a gentle rustle near his door.

"Who 's there?" he called, in a trembling voice.

He was answered by a slight soprano scream and a sudden violent scrambling, as the faithful Marriner, on terror-stricken feet, gained Chloe's room, into which she cast a note before fleeing in a frenzied manner to her virgin chamber in an upper story. The note hit Chloe, who was at the writing-table, in the eye. She uttered an ejaculation of surprise, then controlled herself, and tore it open.

"We must meet to-night," it ran. "Wait till all is quiet, then steal down in the dark to the hall, and meet me there. Do not light a candle, as I think the Duchess is probably on the look-out, full of horrible suspicions. I have extraordinary news to communicate.

"DAISY."

"When all is quiet," murmured Chloe to herself. "And I, too, have extraordinary news to communicate."

She sat waiting in a smoking-coat and a pair of Moorish slippers till the psychological moment should arrive. The minutes wore on in their usual weary manner on such occasions. The wind sighed against the casement, announcing the fact that it was an inclement night. Several times the Duke had crawled to the balustrade of the staircase, and heard that the paragon was still pretending to be asleep. Several times Mr. Rodney had said, "Who 's there?" without result. Several times had the Duchess torn her curl-papers in a fury of anger against Mrs. Verulam, and folded the early Victorian dressing-gown more firmly round her ample form, anticipating the time of action. But nothing happened. Both Mrs. Verulam and Chloe, overwhelmed with pru-

dence, prolonged their vigil, dreading to come forth before the inmates of the palace were duly plunged in sleep. At length the Duke dropped into a nap with his ear to the keyhole. Mr. Rodney's slippered feet grew cold, and he lay down for an instant between the blankets just to get them warm and keep his rheumatic fever a little quiet. Mr. Bliggins, having finished the whole of his parcel of curry, retired for a second from his post to put some trifle up in paper, and lay hold of a magnum of champagne. And the Duchess nodded her head at nothing, and endeavoured to contend with the trooping dreams that thronged about her weary brain. Then Mrs. Verulam stole forth upon the landing, holding in one hand an unlighted bedroom candle, and keeping her draperies quiet with the other. Feeling her way, and suffering many things from walls and balusters, she softly descended the staircase to the hall in which Mr. Bush still sat, although, attacked by a nightmare that paralyzed all his faculties, he had for the moment ceased to snore. Reaching the hall, she paused and listened. She heard no noise except a patter of the rain on some distant cupola. But suddenly a cold hand grasped her.

"Oh!" she cried.

"Be quiet, Daisy!" said Chloe's voice. "It's only me. They're all asleep. Do n't wake them."

"I thought it was a ghost!" gasped Mrs. Verulam, convulsively. "Oh, dear, I should like to cry!"

"There is n't time. I've got dreadful things to whisper. Can't we sit down?"

She felt cautiously for a seat.

"Here's a—no, it's an umbrella stand, we can't sit on that."

"There's something comfortable here," whispered

Mrs. Verulam, and she sank down gently on a large cactus in a porcelain tub.

Her resurrection was instant, and was accompanied by a strangled wail that reached the ears of the nodding Duchess. Her Grace started, grasped the curl-papers in a frenzied manner, and tried to recall who she was and what she was doing. This took time, and meanwhile Mrs. Verulam and Chloe had at last found a large arm-chair, in which they both gingerly ensconced themselves.

"Now," whispered Mrs. Verulam, "I must tell you—"

"And I you, that—"

"Mr. Rodney has heard from Lord Bernard Roche. Do n't pinch me. Oh! oh!"

"Lord Bernard! What does he say? Tell me, tell me quickly!"

"That Husk—that your husband is on his way to England to —"

"I know; only he 's not on his way—he 's here."

"Here! what do you mean?"

"What I say. Yillick wired it. You saw the telegram. He came by the *Arethusa*, and he 's here."

"Not at Ribton Marches? Mercy! Let us go back to our rooms! Oh, why—"

"No, no, but in Berkshire. He may come to Ascot at any moment. What must I do?"

"Do you want to marry him again?"

"Marry! Daisy! What *do* you mean?"

"Well, you know, he wants to marry you. That 's why he has come. If you pinch me I must and will shriek out."

And she struggled vehemently between Chloe's suddenly clutching hands.

"What do you mean? You shall tell me! I will tear it out of you!"

"Help! help!"

"Be quiet! You'll wake the whole house!"

"I do n't care if I do! I won't be murdered without a—"

"There, then! Now be quiet. Marry me again! Huskinson marry me again!"

"Lord Bernard said in his letter to Mr. Rodney that he sailed for England on purpose to do it. He's discovered that you never—Bream, you know. The Crackers have acknowledged they perjured themselves. What are you doing, Chloe? What—"

She listened to a curious little emotional sound that stirred the blackness in Chloe's direction. It was of a gurgling nature, not exactly laughter, not precisely weeping, yet partaking of the nature of both; intense excitement, it seemed, expressing itself in an inarticulate, but irresistible music. It went on for about two minutes, and then Chloe pinched Mrs. Verulam again with all her might and main in silence. Mrs. Verulam's whispered reply to this fresh assault was: "I always thought so, Chloe. You could not deceive me."

"Nonsense! It is n't true!"

"But you can't re-marry him in trousers!"

"Oh, do n't—do n't! I shall take them off! Of course—of course I shall take them off!"

"Yes. But if you do that, what is to happen to me?"

"You!"

"Yes. Remember I exist."

A kiss from Chloe was the ecstatic reply to this protest—a kiss vehement, genuine, and rather loud. It was heard by an early Victorian dressing-gown, which spent the next few minutes in trying to locate it.

"Dear! I'm so glad—for you! But—but it's all very complicated, Chloe."

"Well, but I've done my work. I've saved you from society. Lady Sage has cut you publicly, and all your friends will follow suit. So you're all right now, dear."

"Yes, I'm all right now," said Mrs. Verulam in a most dreary and doleful whisper; "I'm all right now."

"Then I must disappear—to some place where I can change my trousers quietly, some place remote, deserted. Oh, Daisy, how I shall always love that place!"

"And give up society?"

"I do n't care now. I feel as you do."

"As I do?"

"Yes, that it is hollow, meretricious, morbid, vulgar, empty, futile, lying, slanderous, loveless, greedy, vain, hid—"

"Oh, stop! It sounds like 'How the water comes down at Lodore.' I never said all that."

"You said most of it, and you were right. I would rather take off these trousers and—and—well, you know—Huskinson, than consort with archduchesses for the rest of my natural life."

"Oh, archduchesses—yes," said Mrs. Verulam, rather doubtfully. "Viennese society is so very stiff and conventional."

"Love is the only thing," continued Chloe, once more passionately pinching her friend. "You are right."

"Did I say so?"

"Daisy! Why, about Bungay and Mr. Bush! Why, when you first saw him in his meat-safe, you—"

"Yes, yes, I remember. But I dare say it was n't really a meat-safe, though it was very like one." She started, as if struck by a sudden idea. "Bungay!" she

cried, in an excited whisper. "Bungay! your trousers. The very place!"

"Bungay, my trousers! What do you mean? Surely it would spoil them!"

"Listen! You want to change them, do n't you?"

"Yes, yes, as soon as possible."

"In a quiet, sweet place, full of roses, the hum of bees, the—"

"I do n't know that the hum of bees is actually necessary. I might manage without that."

"And I—I am weary of it all. I am sick of being cut and cold-shouldered."

"Already? I thought you enjoyed it."

"Yes, just at first. But now I want to get out of it all. I can't go to the races to-morrow."

"Nor can I. Huskinson may be there. And if he saw me in—well, I should just expire!"

"And the Duchess is going to cut me, too, as soon as the week is over. I have no social duty towards her now. I have no social duty to anyone. Chloe, let us go! Let us creep away!"

"Creep! Where to?"

"To Bungay. There must be cots there; we will take one."

"A cot? What's that?"

"A thing that is smaller than a cottage. We will bury ourselves—"

"Creep away and bury ourselves—it sounds rather earthy."

"You shall change your trousers. I will dream, work, learn the true life; *he* shall teach me."

"James Bush?"

"Yes. Let us go."

"When?"

"Now."

"Is there a train at one o'clock in the morning?"

"It is not far, I think; only some miles."

"Some—yes; but how many? Two or twenty?"

"It is in this county somewhere. We will find it."

"I hope so."

"I shall leave a note, saying—er—"

"What lie?"

"That I am called to the sick-bed of a dear mother."

"But Lady Sophia's quite well."

"Of a dying sis—no; I have n't got one—a dying relative. Everybody has a dying relative, so that will do. Oh, to be away in the free air!"

"The free air's very cold on a wet night."

"Are you a coward, Chloe?"

"I! No!" cried Chloe in a violent whisper. "I'll go now—this instant. A coward—never!"

"Then away—away!"

"Yes—yes; away!"

At the third "away" Mr. Bush emerged from his nightmare and renewed his vociferous snoring. Mrs. Verulam and Chloe started and trembled.

"What's that?" said Mrs. Verulam. "Oh! is it a ghost?"

"It sounds like something horrible! Oh, and there's a light flickering! Daisy—Daisy, let us run!"

And they ran, just as the Duchess, with bristling curl-papers and a night-light shrouded in a fragment of the *Times* newspaper, appeared cautiously at the head of the stairs, the early Victorian dressing-gown streaming out behind her in a majestic and terror-striking manner. Her Grace had heard the impact of Chloe's kiss, followed by the sound of excited whisperings, which she had finally located as emanating from the baronial hall.

Listening with a strained attention, and eyes becoming far more prominent than those of the average lobster, she had presently arrived at the awful certainty that the whispering voices belonged to her hostess and the orange-grower. She therefore fell into a paroxysm of respectable fury, and, catching up the night-light, proceeded forth to confront wickedness in its very lair, and force it to acknowledge itself and to receive a terrible castigation. Unluckily, the premature snores of the paragon had served as a warning of her approach by distracting the attention of Mrs. Verulam and Chloe from their own engrossing concerns; and consequently before the Duchess had time to miss her footing, and, stumbling into the labyrinth of the early Victorian dressing-gown, to fall, and, bounding from step to step of the Emperor's expensive staircase, to roll, night-light in hand, into the baronial hall, they were well away among the winter gardens, out of hearing and almost beyond the reach of pursuit.

The noise of her Grace's intercourse with the Emperor's oak and Parian marble not only disturbed the rest of the paragon—which was perfectly genuine, despite the suspicions of the Duke—but attracted the painful attention of the owner of Mitching Dean in the green, and of his Grace in the chocolate, bedroom. Mr. Rodney trembled in a nervous paroxysm, and the perspiration, as was its custom, stood in beads upon his narrow brow. The Duke, who had been napping, sprang up, lit a candle after about eight-and-twenty attempts, seized the nearest weapon at hand—a cat's-eye breast-pin, with diamond strawberry leaves and the Southborough crest, a sheep's head rouge in the cup of a tulip noir—and made forth upon the landing like one distraught, exactly as his Duchess rolled to the very feet

of the paragon covered with bruises and abrasions, the night-light extinguished in her fist. Feeling in agony for something to stay her barrel-like progress, her Grace grasped Mr. Bush in the dark, and he, suddenly waked from sleep, and perhaps under some such impression as that he was beset by stranglers or attended by phantoms, grappled her in return, greatly to her terror. She screamed; he grappled all the more. And the Duke, staring wildly over the balustrade, beheld a picture that might well shake the faith of the most trusting husband in Christendom—at any rate it shook his to its foundations. He protruded the candle over the balustrade, and roared in a voice of thunder:

“I’ve caught you at last, have I?”

The question rang through the hall. The paragon heard it, and perceived the fierce and frenzied countenance of his Grace, then, gazing downwards, beheld the Duchess in a dressing-gown kneeling at his feet. This was enough. Under the impression that he must have made an impression on her Grace, and that the Duke was about to take vengeance on the guiltless as well as on the guilty party, he cast the Duchess off and fled he knew not whither.

“You shall not escape me!” shrieked the Duke.
“Your blood—I’ll have it!”

And leaping down the remaining stairs, he jumped the Duchess cleverly, and tore after the paragon with the fixed intention of taking it there and then. The Duchess fled in an opposite direction just as Miss Binder, who had been waked by all this noise and movement, opened her bedroom door, and, suspecting cracksmen, emptied six chambers of her pocket-revolver over the landing into the hall, at the same time remarking:

"This sort of thing won't do; it's time someone taught these fellows a lesson."

Although the Bun Emperor's palace was exceedingly large, it now contained so many people in full flight that there was some slight danger of their knocking up against one another. Mrs. Verulam and Chloe, Mr. James Bush, the Duke and the Duchess, were all stretching away at full speed in various directions, and to their number were shortly added Mr. Harrison, Mr. Bliggins, and the owner of Mitching Dean. The groom of the chambers was disturbed in his operations at the telephone by being knocked down just as he was saying to the Emperor:

"Oh, most certainly, sir; you may rely on me, and Mrs. Lite, to my latest breath—oh, indeed! I know I am, sir—I know I am responsible; and if so much as the house is set afire, or the furniture is broke to pieces, I shall—"

At this point in his discourse the paragon ran against him like a charging elephant, and laid him low; and while he was engaged in endeavouring to get up, the Duke fell over him, and the noise of Miss Bindler's six shots rang through the palace. Mr. Harrison sat up, and the Duke began to strangle him, while Mr. Rodney, terrified by Miss Bindler's behaviour, tore out of the green bedroom, and rushed to the detectives' quarters, crying in a piercing voice:

"Save yourselves! All is over! Save yourselves!"

Four of the detectives were so fast asleep that they took no manner of notice of this kindly warning; but Mr. Bliggins, dropping his paper of trifle and tippy-cake, and letting his magnum fall with a crash, took to his heels, and, after making the entire circuit of the palace about eighty-five times at the top of his speed, plunged

head-foremost through a plate-glass window, emerged into the domain, and never stopped till he reached London, where he at once took up another profession.

Mr. Harrison was not of a temper to be strangled, even by a Duke, without making some show of opposition; and on this occasion he exerted himself to such good purpose that, after about ten minutes of acute struggling, during which the fortunes of war sometimes inclined to one side and sometimes to the other, he succeeded in extricating his throat from his Grace's claws, when, wailing at the top of his voice, he flapped off into the darkness, and was no more seen. This misadventure had given the paragon such a start that he gained his bedroom in safety, turned the key eight or nine times in the lock, and then began tying the bed-sheets together with a view to instantly escaping to Bungay by the window. The sheets were, however, too short, and he was forced to desist from this attempt. Meanwhile the Duke, believing that he had very nearly killed Mr. Bush, who had probably only escaped for the moment to die a lingering death in some distant corner of the palace, got up and hurried away to Mr. Rodney's room, which he reached just as the owner of Mitching Dean darted back into it, and was preparing to shut the door on imaginary murderers.

"Do n't dare to enter!" cried Mr. Rodney, struggling to bang the door on the Duke. "I shal' certainly kill the first man who enters!"

He meant that the first man who entered would certainly kill him, but that was his way of putting it.

"Rodney! Rodney!" cried his Grace. "Let me in, Rodney—let me in!"

"If I sell my life, I'll sell it dearly!" replied Mr. Rodney. "I will not be slain without a struggle."

And he elongated himself against the swaying door, while Miss Bindler, with rapid precision, reloaded her revolver in the adjoining bedroom, and the Duchess tore through Winter Garden No. 3.

"Rodney, do n't be a fool! Do n't be an ass, Rodney!"

"I will! Nothing shall prevent me—nothing on earth! I will! I will!" replied the owner of Mitching Dean, with an attempt at manly decision of manner.

But the Duke was desperate, and was also very much stronger physically than Mr. Rodney. He therefore burst in the door, and added:

"Rodney, you must act for me in this affair—I insist upon it; I require it of you. Rodney, you must act for me in this affair."

The owner of Mitching Dean, who was busily engaged in trying to get under the bed before his visitor had time to slay him, made no reply to this demand, unless the putting of his head and nearly half his trunk into hiding, could be called so. But the Duke had laid aside all sense of his great position, and now pointed his remarks, and endeavoured to convey a sense of their real urgency by seizing fast hold of Mr. Rodney's left leg, and trying with might and main to eject him from the position which he had taken up.

"I will die here! I will not be killed in the open! I will die here!" cried Mr. Rodney, in a suffocated voice, passionately endeavouring to force some more of his person beneath the tester.

"You'll die where I choose!" retorted his Grace, losing his temper and commencing to handle the unfortunate gentleman rather roughly. "Come out of it!"

"No, no; I will not come out! I will die here!"

shrieked Mr. Rodney, while Miss Bindler emerged once more upon the landing, and again started firing about the palace.

"Come out you shall!" shouted the Duke, and he acted with such vigor that in something less than ten minutes he had forced Mr. Rodney from his cover and dragged him, smothered with dust and pale with terror, into the open.

"Do it mercifully! For Heaven's sake, kill me without hurting me!" began the owner of Mitching Dean, looking at his Grace with eyes that had retreated far into his head. "What—you, Duke! I thought you were one of my oldest and most valued—you to fly at me like—"

"Rodney, you're an ass! You're a fool, Rodney! But, all the same, you must act for me in this affair."

Mr. Rodney, beginning to gather that his slaughter was not so imminent as he had previously supposed, now endeavoured to assume an air of dignity.

"Duke, this is strange language," he began stiffly.

"Damned strange! and so 's it strange your getting under the bed directly I try to speak to you. Sit down."

And the Duke thrust the owner of Mitching Dean into a sitting posture upon the bed, closed the door, turned the key in the lock, returned to Mr. Rodney—who had meanwhile again gone very pale, suspecting treachery—and remarked:

"Rodney, I've just been trying to strangle that fellow Bush!"

This was scarcely reassuring, but Mr. Rodney forced a tortured smile, and stammered, with white lips:

"Did you—did you succeed—in doing so. Duke?"

"Only partially, Rodney—only partially, I fear," returned his Grace. "He managed to get away from me."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, just as I was on the point of choking the life out of him."

"What—what a pity!" gasped Mr. Rodney, in a humouring tone.

The Duke grasped his trembling hand.

"You're a good fellow, Rodney!" he exclaimed. "I knew I could rely on you."

"Oh, certainly, Duke, certainly. Rely on me, pray!"

"I will. Then you will act for me in this affair?"

"Yes, yes, with the greatest pleasure!" cried Mr. Rodney, feebly temporizing.

"Thank you! You're a man after all! We'll kill him yet, between us!"

Mr. Rodney gasped. Still he preferred the *rôle* of murderer to the *rôle* of dead body, on the whole. He therefore thought it best to reply:

"I hope so—I sincerely hope so."

"My belief is this," continued the Duke, knitting his brows ferociously, "that the fellow is already more than half dead."

"Dear me!"

"Although he had sufficient strength left to crawl away and hide himself—Heaven knows where."

"Oh!"

"Either he'll die in some attic or basement, under a pump, or in a sink, or somewhere, like the rat he is, or he'll break out of the place and make a bee-line for Bungay. In that event, we shall follow him directly it's dawn."

"Quite so, Duke—quite so!"

"Force a duel on him then and there, and shoot him like a dog in his own damned cabbage-garden!"

"An excellent plan—excellent!" cried Mr. Rodney, trembling in the absolute conviction that the Duke was raving mad. "How—how clever of you to think of it!"

"This sort of business makes a man think," said the Duke moodily.

"It does—it does, indeed!" murmured Mr. Rodney, who had, perhaps, thought more during the last fifteen minutes than in the whole course of his previous life.

"Very well, then," said the Duke; "then that's settled?"

"Quite—absolutely!"

"Do n't you play me false."

"Oh, Duke! Could you suppose such a thing possible?" cried Mr. Rodney, assuming an injured air.

"I shall search for the fellow first. If I find him still here, I'll finish killing him now. If not, you and I start for Bungay as soon as it's dawn. That's the bargain?"

"That is the bargain."

"Wait here, then, till I come back."

And his Grace left the room, carrying the door-key with him in an absent-minded manner. Mr. Rodney remained sitting on the bed in a convulsed attitude, staring at nothing. He had, of course, intended to lock and double-lock the door after the Duke's exit. Precluded from taking this simple measure of precaution, he was reduced to a jelly, and, as such, was naturally incapable of movement. He therefore remained where he was, and when his Grace, after a considerable interval, returned to the room, he found the gentleman who was to act for him in this affair still crouched in a heap upon the mattress, and looking far more dead than most ordinary living people can manage.

"Rodney," said the Duke, "he's gone! He's got away!"

Mr. Rodney nodded. He was incapable of speech.

"We shall follow him as soon as it's dawn. Get your coat and hat."

"I—I beg your pardon?"

"Get your coat and hat."

Mr. Rodney began to look for those articles in the tooth-brush dish. Not finding them there, he again collapsed, perhaps from surprise. The Duke, seeing his condition, rummaged in the wardrobe, produced his Ascot silk hat and a travelling ulster, handed them to him, and then remarked:

"Now follow me. We shall spend the rest of the night in my room considering the best course to take—pistols or swords—and directly it's light we'll break into the stables, saddle a couple of horses with our own hands and ride across country to Bungay. I've got a map of the district. We shall go as the crow flies."

"As the crow flies!" murmured Mr. Rodney, imbecile in the presence of this delightful programme: a few hours with a maniac, succeeded by horse-stealing, and continuing with twenty or thirty miles across a difficult country in a top-hat, the whole to conclude with a cold-blooded murder in a marsh. However, he followed the Duke with tottering steps, and a tongue which clave to the roof of his mouth.

Meanwhile, the paragon had indeed escaped from the palace. After finding that it was impossible to swarm down the sheets, Mr. Bush took counsel with himself and resolved to dare all in the effort to reach a place of safety beyond the vengeance of the Duke. He therefore, choosing a moment when Miss Bindler was engaged in reloading her burglar-destroyer for the third time, stole forth from his bedroom and gained the baronial hall unobserved. Once there, he, with cautious hand,

proceeded to unbar the mighty front door, and found himself presently facing a wild night. The wind was getting up. The rain was coming down. The darkness was intense. He hesitated. But death was behind him, and he resolved to go. Only for one instant did he stay to catch up from the hall-table a bottle of whisky and a box of cigars, provender for the journey. In justice to him, it must here be stated that he had no time to notice that the whisky bottle was of silver, engraved with the Emperor's crest, a *bun couchant* on a plate d'or, and that the cigar-box happened, by some oversight, to be made of gold set with turquoises, and surrounded by a legend setting forth that it was presented to Mr. Lite by the Bun-makers' Company as a mark of their "affection and regard." Laden thus, the paragon disappeared into the darkness, made his way to the stables, by a fortunate chance ran across a shed in which the head coachman—a venerable and a very heavy man—stabled his own private tricycle, and by the time the Duke was searching for him in the sink, was tricycling at a good round pace along the highroad that led to Bungay. He flattered himself that his exit had been unnoticed. It had, however, been observed by two people, the Duchess, who was at that moment fleeing through an adjoining boudoir, and Mr. Harrison, who was running away in a contiguous winter-garden. Now, the groom of the chambers had a stern sense of duty, which did not entirely desert him even when he was trying to escape from being strangled. He therefore stayed his flight to inform the Emperor that the paragon had just made off, loaded with gold and silver, presentation caskets, and other costly treasure, and then continued running away until his strength was totally exhausted.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TRUE LIFE

As the first pale streak of dawn rose over the peaceful marshes of Bungay, and touched with palest rose the thatched eaves of the Farm, Mr. Jacob Minnidick, as was his custom, arose cursing and swearing from his truckle bed. Mr. Minnidick possessed a temperament which displayed itself chiefly in personal abuse, and he was quite as ready to direct this abuse against Nature as against man. Indeed, he was accustomed to treat the weather as his deliberate enemy, the sun or rain as full of a spite against him, the very earth itself as emphatically hostile to him, emphatically set on "getting at him" so far as Providence permitted.

"Darn it!" remarked Mr. Minnidick, putting on a stocking with a hole in it. "Darn it all, I say!"

And he proceeded to make a sketchy toilet of a rather corduroy nature, after which he walked to the narrow window and looked forth across the marshes. The grass was saturated with rain. Mr. Minnidick viewed it with sour disfavour.

"A deal of good it 'll do us," he muttered. "Did n't I 'ave to drain the water off only yesterday, and the three-foot-sixer choked up, as I allers knew 'twould be. Darn the rain, I say!"

He shook a gnarled old fist at it out of the window, and heavily descended the narrow stairs.

Some three score and ten summers had passed over Mr. Minnidick's head, and been darned by him, since he was born, yet still he laboured on as Mr. Bush's assistant in the grand, true life aimed at by Mrs. Verulam. His small and thin form was duly bent with years. His legs were bowed. His scanty gray hair fell adown his stooping shoulders, and his nut-cracker mouth, fallen in, moved incessantly as if he were trying to masticate invisible food. In fact, he lived up to his name and calling most thoroughly, and would have looked quite realistic in an Adelphi hay-field, or Drury Lane cabbage scene. Emerging now into the garden, he glanced angrily around from under his shaggy eyebrows. He beheld a flat plot of ground bounded by tough hedges, in one of which stood a wicket-gate. There were beds of flowers, small paths, a thicket of trees, and a vegetable domain adorned with melon and cucumber frames against a moss-grown wall. Cherries were being forced in pots; beehives stood about; an old-fashioned brick flue had been turned into accommodation for some mysterious fruit; a small brick house, about as big as a loose-box with a roof to it, and devoid of windows, sheltered a pit in which mushroom-spawn was germinating in dense darkness and dull heat. Elsewhere stood two or three rather ramshackle outhouses. The Farm itself was a small and plain building, with narrow windows almost blinded with creepers, a door in the middle, and protruding eaves like Mr. Minnidick's eyebrows. Flattish land stretched away to the horizon on every side, steaming now in the gathering light of the morning. Mr. Minnidick surveyed this prospect and continued:

"Darn it all, I say!"

This sentence had been his morning hymn of praise for more than half a century, and it was quite certain

that he would only cease to uplift it with the coming of death. His matins completed, Mr. Minnidick took his way to one of the outhouses, making a slight detour on the journey to glance at some marl and a pet manure tank, and, selecting from various implements a favourite hoe and an enormous spade, returned to the kitchen-garden, prepared his hands for labour in the usual manner, and began performing various mysterious rites among the cabbages, peas, potatoes, and other vegetables with which Mr. Bush's estate was liberally endowed. Now and then he desisted from labour for a moment, and on these occasions he invariably looked towards the wicket-gate and muttered, "He 's a beauty—darn 'im!" a statement which seemed to bring with it great satisfaction, and to cause a certain amount of exultation in Mr. Minnidick's earnest and retiring soul. Towards seven o'clock, as Mr. Minnidick was looking towards the gate for the twentieth or so time, and was in the very act of opening his purse-like mouth in his age-honoured and terse remark, there appeared before him a vision that seemed to fill him with amazement. For he dropped the favourite hoe among some sprouts, set his hands over his eyes, let fall his lower jaw, and stared as one that sees a ghost.

"Darn it all!" he murmured. "If it ain't 'im aback a'ready! Darn it all, I say!"

"'Im" signified the paragon, who had indeed at that very instant ridden up to the gate on the Emperor's head coachman's tricycle, and who now dismounted therefrom with much groaning, and walked unsteadily into the garden, the pockets of his coat bulging with the silver whisky-bottle and the gold presentation cigar-box. He approached the sprouts among which his retainer was standing, and gave the latter a sulky nod of

the head, to which Mr. Minnidick returned a nod that was, if possible, sulkier.

"How 's the vegs?" mumbled Mr. Bush.

"Mortial spoilt by rain—darn 'em!" replied Mr. Minnidick. "Mortial spoilt."

And he stared harder than ever at Mr. Bush, whose saturated evening costume was now beginning to steam in the sun.

"What's brought ye back s' soon?" he inquired.

The paragon shuffled his feet.

"What 's that to yer?" he replied. "Why do n't yer get to hoein'?"

Mr. Minnidick munched and swallowed nothing with considerable vehemence for some minutes, and then he said, with excruciating bitterness:

"Why do n't ye git to them as drew ye from hoein'?"

"Shut yer head, I've done with 'em," said the paragon.

"Oh, I dessay," returned Mr. Minnidick, with aggravated grievousness, "I dessay, but where 's the garding been while ye was with 'em? Who 's seen arter the mushrms? Who's a-cared for them there mellings? Who's been a-watchin' of the cowcumpers? Lawks-a-mussy! Darn it all, I say!"

Mr. Bush deigned no reply to these passionate questions, but proceeded heavily into the house, from which he presently emerged, clad in more suitable raiment, still loaded with the Emperor's gold and silver, and in the act of swallowing a mighty hunch of home-made bread. Without making any further remark, he laid hold of a spade and began to dig in gloomy silence, while Mr. Minnidick went on hoeing and muttering angrily to himself. How long these pastoral occupations would have continued in ordinary circumstances, it is impossible to say. They might, perhaps, have been

protracted till full noontide, had not a sound of horses galloping in the adjacent lane suddenly attracted the attention of the paragon, who rested upon his spade, scratched his huge head, and began to look rather uneasy.

"Whatever 's that?" he muttered.

"'Osses," replied Mr. Minnidick. "A-runnin' away, darn 'em!"

It really seemed as if there were something in this remark, for the noise upon the highway proclaimed that the animals were approaching at a tremendous pace, and would soon be in view of the diligent gardeners. Scarcely had Mr. Minnidick made his last statement, when Mr. Bush went through a somewhat remarkable performance. He dropped his spade, and cast himself down on the earth upon his face, at the same time shouting to Mr. Minnidick:

"Stand before me! Cover me up! Throw sprouts on me! Throw sprouts over me!"

These suggestions were not carried out, for Mr. Minnidick was of a leisurely turn of mind, and at no time of a disposition to sacrifice valuable cabbage growths without good reason. He therefore merely rested on his hoe and stared, at the same time munching the air with extraordinary rapidity and determination. And thus he was posed, like some Shakespearian rustic, when two smoking horses hove in sight, and the air was rent with the cracking of a hunting-whip, and the furious cries of one of the riders.

"Give him his head, Rodney! give him his head, I tell you!"

"I have been giving it him for the last three hours, Duke. If I give it him any more I shall be killed, I shall, indeed!"

"Take your arms from his neck, I tell you!"

"I will not. If I do I shall be thrown. Both the reins have been broken for hours."

"That's because you held 'em so damned tight. You'd break a six-foot rope that'd anchor a man-of-war. Why do n't you sit straight?"

"Because I can't, because—I—am—dropping!"

The unfortunate owner of Mitching Dean did indeed seem in a perilous condition. Wrapped in the travelling ulster, his silk hat smashed into a pulp and fixed, by the edge of a rent, on his left ear, he was laid out almost flat along his horse with his arms clasped round its neck. His long, white face was smothered in liquid mud, which had only dried upon the bridge of his nose, forming a sort of forbidding-looking island in the midst of his wrinkled countenance. His trousers had been torn into ribbons by the quick-set hedges through which he had passed, and the five-barred gates he had reduced to splinters. One of his stirrups had gone. His reins, as he had affirmed, fluttered around his horse's chest in fragments, and he had, in some mysterious manner, lost a boot, possibly in a small pond in which his animal had recently lain down and rolled out of sheer gaiety of disposition. Altogether, he scarcely looked his best as he reached the hedge of the paragon's domain. On perceiving the rigid figure of Mr. Minnidick, the Duke suddenly pulled up, with the result that Mr. Rodney cannoned against him and promptly bit the mud.

"Damn you, Rodney! Why do n't you look where you're going?" said his Grace, crossly. "Here, you—my man, can you tell me the way to the Farm, Bungay Marshes, Lisborough?"

"Heh?"

"I want the Farm, Bungay Marshes, Lisborough."

"What d' ye want 'un fur?"

"What the deuce is that to you? Get on again, Rodney, or the brute 'll be off."

"I cannot. I am unable; I fear both my legs are fractured."

"Nonsense! The shaking 'll do you good—wake you up—put some spirit into you. Well, my man, don't you know where the Farm is?"

"Yes, I knows," said Mr. Minnidick.

"Where, then?"

" 'Ereabouts."

"I know that."

"What did ye arst me fur, then?"

"Shovel the sprouts over me, d' ye hear? Cover me over!" muttered Mr. Bush, while the Duke angrily rejoined:

"If I have any of your impudence, I 'll give you a taste of my whip. Tell me where the Farm is this moment."

"I have told ye."

"Where is it?"

" 'Ereabouts."

"Where the devil 's hereabouts?"

"Where I 'm a-standing of."

"Where you 're standing! Why did n't you say so?"

"I did say so—darn it all!"

"Where 's your master?" said the Duke. "Is he back?"

"Heh?"

"Where the deuce is your infernal master?"

" 'Ereabouts," replied Mr. Minnidick calmly, despite renewed and furious whispers of "Throw sprouts over me! Cover me up!" from the paragon.

"Where the deuce is that?"

"Where I 'm a-standin' of," replied Mr. Minnidick, indicating Mr. Bush with the favourite hoe.

The Duke leaped from his horse.

"Here, catch hold, Rodney!" he cried, flinging the reins to the owner of Mitching Dean, who, failing to grasp them, permitted the animal to gallop from the spot at the rate of about twenty miles an hour.

"Rodney, you 're the —dest muddler I ever met in the whole course of my life!" said the Duke witheringly, as he tied up the remaining horse, and proceeded to scramble over the hedge in a most murderous and determined manner.

The paragon hastily sat up among the cabbages, and raised his arms before his face in an attitude of awkward defence.

"You rascal!" said the Duke—"you infernal rascal! Then I did n't strangle you, after all?"

"Eh?" said Mr. Bush, sulkily, and still keeping up his arms.

"I did n't strangle you. But I will!"

"Duke, Duke, let me counsel delay!" cried Mr. Rodney from the other side of the hedge. "Take time, I implore you—take a little time to think it over."

"Rodney, hold your tongue! I thought I'd killed you," continued his Grace to Mr. Bush.

"You never touched me!" growled the paragon. "You never caught me; I went too quick."

At this statement the Duke looked surprised.

"I certainly strangled someone," he said meditatively. "Rodney, I know I strangled somebody. Who could it have been?"

"Possibly it was merely a footman, Duke," said Mr. Rodney, in a relieved tone of voice. "You ought to be very thankful, I am sure."

"I dare say, a footman; or it may have been only Bliggins. It do n't matter. What does matter is that I'm going to have satisfaction. D' you hear, sir?" he shouted in Mr. Bush's ear.

"I ain't deaf," retorted that gentleman.

"I'm going to fight you and kill you in your own garden here."

"Darn it all, I say!" from Mr. Minnidick, who was standing calmly by during this social intercourse.

"Duke, I implore you, be calm!" cried Mr. Rodney, grasping some brambles oratorically. "Kill him quietly; do n't make a scene, Duke—for Heaven's sake, do n't make a scene!"

"He shall have a chance, Rodney; he shall die in fair fight. Choose your weapons!" he added to the paragon.

"Eh?"

"Choose your weapons! What do you generally fight with here?"

"Hoes," replied Mr. Bush sulkily, while Mr. Minnidick muttered something about "Allers fight with a 'oe and you won't repint of it."

"Hoes!" said his Grace. "I've never tried them. I shall have to practise first; that's only fair."

"Yes, yes!" cried Mr. Rodney eagerly—"that's it. "Take a week to practise, and then kill him quietly."

"A week! An hour will be enough," said the Duke. "Very well, hoes let it be; where can I get one?"

"At the Elephant and Drum," mumbled the paragon.

"What the deuce is that?"

"The inn to Bungay."

"An inn!" exclaimed Mr. Rodney—"an inn! The very place. There are always plenty of hoes at an inn, and things to eat, and water to wash in. The Elephant and Drum is the very place for us."

"How far is it?" said his Grace.

"Only a mile straight on," said Mr. Bush, "as the rooks a-go."

"I shall be back in an hour or two, then; and mind if you try to get away, I'll follow you to the ends of the earth and strangle you there. Now, then— Hulloa! what's that?"

His Grace had perceived the tricycle standing at the wicket-gate. A crafty look came into his face, such as decorates Dan Leno's when that marvel is enacting clever Mr. Green.

"Rodney!" he said.

"Duke!"

"Come over the hedge, get on that tricycle, and follow me; I'll ride the horse."

"But, Duke, I have never tricycled in my life. Indeed, I—"

"Come over the hedge and get on this moment!"

Mr. Rodney feebly crawled sufficiently high up the brambles to be caught hold of and thrown among the sprouts. He was then picked up, led to the machine and placed upon it in a nerveless and quivering heap. The Duke gave him a push, and, as the Farm stood on a slight eminence, the machine instantly ran off at an increasing pace till Mr. Rodney's cries for assistance died down towards the horizon. Then the Duke mounted the horse, gave Mr. Bush a sinister look, informed him that the duel would take place within the next two hours—or three, at latest—and galloped off towards the inn.

Mr. Bush and Mr. Minnidick examined each other's physiognomies for a moment with some attention. Then Mr. Bush grunted; Mr. Minnidick replied, "Darn it all, I say!" and they resumed their labours among the

sprouts. It seemed that Mr. Bush considered any attempt at further flight useless; or possibly he thought that he could hold his own with a hoe against any living man. In either case, he looked more dogged and heavier than usual as he solemnly turned up the damp earth with his spade, and arranged the lives of various inoffensive and patient vegetables for them, no doubt entirely to his own satisfaction. Presently the rattle of a trotting chaise disturbed these processes. Mr. Bush paused and scratched his head.

"Whatever 's that?" he asked.

"A kerridge a-comin'," said Mr. Minnidick.

"What should a carriage a-come for?" rejoined the paragon.

Mr. Minnidick uttered his morning hymn, and stared across the hedge by way of reply, while Mr. Bush looked somewhat inclined to lie down again among the sprouts. He stood his ground, however, and was rewarded almost immediately by the appearance of a tub-like chaise chiefly constructed of basket-work, and drawn by a tottering white pony which was driven by a small boy with a very sharply-pointed nose, at whose side—in an attitude of large abandonment and intimate despair—was spread her Grace the Duchess of Southborough. On seeing the paragon, her Grace gave vent to a bass screech, and seizing the hands of the boy with the sharply-pointed nose—much to that individual's fury—compelled him to bring the white pony to against the hedge.

"Oh, Mr. Bush! Mr. Bush!" cried the Duchess.

"What's brought you a-here?" queried the paragon.

"Oh, Mr. Bush, you have ruined me! You have undone me, Mr. Bush!" continued the Duchess, on her most piercing lower notes.

"Get along with yer!" said Mr. Bush, while Mr. Min-

nidick, poised upon the favourite hoe in a gardening attitude, surveyed the dreadful scene.

"You have, indeed. But you must make reparation! You must and shall!"

And her Grace, who still wore the early Victorian dressing-gown, surmounted with a waterproof cloak, and crowned by a bonnet and feathers, began attempting to scramble over the hedge into the paragon's domain.

"What are yer up to now?" said Mr. Bush. "Where are yer a-makin' for?"

"You!" replied the Duchess, atop of a big bramble interspersed with stakes. "You, you bad, evil-minded man!"

And she pitched into the mould at Mr. Minnidick's feet, head foremost.

"Darn it all, I say!" quoth Mr. Minnidick, while the small boy with the sharply-pointed nose broke out incontinently a-laughing.

"You must go to the Duke, Mr. Bush," proceeded her Grace, getting right end up, and raising her hands towards heaven. "You must go to him and tell him how innocent I am!"

"Innercent—oh, crikey!" said the small boy, emerging for an instant from his convulsions and speaking in a very high treble voice. "Innercent, does she sy?" and he relapsed again into his fit.

Mr. Bush began to look very sulky, and rather as if he were meditating a nap. The Duchess clasped his knees.

"Oh, Mr Bush!" she wailed; "do me justice! set me right! Go to my husband and tell him what a true wife I have always been to him!"

"Give over! Give over now!"

"I will not give over! I have followed you here, for

you alone can tell the Duke that there's nothing between— Oh, hide me! hide me! There's a carriage coming! Oh, if am seen here I am lost forever! Hide me!"

"Give over! Where can yer be a-hid?"

Her Grace sprang up with amazing agility for so large a woman. She glanced around like a hunted elephant. She heard the noise of rapidly approaching wheels. Her protruding eye took in the aspect of the place, ravaging it for its possibilities of concealment. Then, with the wail of a thing at bay, she fled across the vegetable-garden, fought her way through a small, but dense jungle of gooseberry bushes, and darted into the mushroom-house just as a hired fly containing Mrs. Verulam, Chloe, and the faithful Marriner drove up to the wicket-gate.

"She'll a-treadle down the spawn! She'll do a-mischief on them there mushrims! Darn it all, I say!" was Mr. Minnidick's comment on her Grace's choice of sanctuary, while Mr. Bush, who—perhaps deliberately—became more and more lethargic with each accumulating disaster, solemnly started digging again, with the manner of a labourer totally isolated from all intercourse with humankind.

The bed of sprouts, which seemed rapidly becoming the centre of a whirlpool of violent activities, was at some little distance from the residence of the paragon, and was partially concealed from the wicket-gate and the flower-garden by a small hedge of yew. For this reason, perhaps, the occupants of the hired fly did not at first observe that the garden was tenanted. After inquiring the way to the nearest inn, and being duly informed of the existence of the Elephant and Drum,

Mrs. Verulam and Chloe descended from the vehicle, in which the faithful Marriner—looking rather pale—was deliberately driven away.

Mrs. Verulam approached the wicket-gate, leaned upon it, and breathed a gentle sigh.

"Ah, Chloe," she murmured; "how exquisitely peaceful it is! Just what I expected. No harm could happen here. No echoes from the cruel world could ever pierce to this haven. Here there are no intrigues, no quarrels, no secrets, no slanders. Here all is rest and happiness."

"Quite so, dear. And here, or at least very near here, at the Elephant and Drum, I shall be able to change my trousers. It is sweet!"

"It's like heaven!" said Mrs. Verulam ecstatically. "How little Mr. Bush knows that we are here looking upon his birth-place"—the paragon was born at Brixton, but no matter—"breathing the same air he has so often breathed!"

"You're hardly scientific, Daisy. Besides, by this time Mr. Bush is reading your note at the palace, and the Duchess and all of them know of our departure."

"Ah—true; I had forgotten that. I wonder what the Duchess is saying."

Her Grace was at the moment saying, "Oh, I shall be suffocated!" as she tried to compose herself upon a stack of dibble-holes filled with spawn that would have rejoiced the heart of Nicol.

"No doubt she is taking away your character," said Chloe.

"I hate those large, respectable women!" said Mrs. Verulam with sudden energy, and getting very red.

The special large, respectable woman to whom she

alluded was furtively considering the chances of apoplexy, and marvelling at the heroic endurance displayed by the average mushroom.

"Mr. Rodney will be terribly shocked at my running away like this," continued Mrs. Verulam. "He is so neat, so cautious, so deliberate. He cannot understand a wild impulse, and would rather die than embark on any fierce adventure.

This chanced to be the very thought passing through the mind of the owner of Mitching Dean at this moment, as he offered the Duke a choice of hoes in the back yard of the Elephant and Drum, preparatory to taking his stand in the shadow of an upturned tub, to be practised upon in preparation for the duel.

"Poor Mr. Rodney!" said Chloe.

Mrs. Verulam got red again.

"Why poor?" she said.

"Because—oh, Daisy, you know quite well."

"Please don't be silly, Chloe. I wonder who it was that fired all those shots last night, and what all the noise was about."

"I can't imagine—burglars, perhaps. It covered our escape most beautifully. Well, Daisy, you're out of your cage now with a vengeance. Society will never have anything more to do with a hostess who leaves a Duke and a Duchess stranded in the middle of an Ascot week. You might have got over a murder safely, or even me, but you can never get over that."

"I suppose the Duke is furious," said Mrs. Verulam, rather wistfully.

She happened to be right. His Grace was furious just then with the owner of Mitching Dean, who, in endeavouring to defend his person from the Duke's attack during the rehearsal, had used his hoe in such an

unwarrantable manner as to black his Grace's left eye, and very nearly knock out a couple of his Grace's front teeth.

"It can't be helped if he is," said Chloe, wondering what was the exact condition of the Lady Pearl.

"Mr. Bush will follow us immediately, I feel sure," continued Mrs. Verulam, wholly unaware that the paragon had immediately preceded them. "I can see him here before me in his sweet little home;" and as she spoke she opened the wicket-gate with a click and advanced into the garden.

"There does n't seem to be anybody about," said Chloe, behaving like a person on the stage, and looking everywhere but in the direction where there was somebody to be seen; "not a creature, not a soul. Let us sit down for a moment and rest;" and she took a seat upon a deal bench, of which the mushroom-house formed the back.

The Duchess trembled on the dibble-holes.

"This is deliciously comfortable," said Mrs. Verulam. "I shall always sit on plain wood for the future. Shall you be glad to change your trousers?"

"Little hussy!" thought the Duchess, swelling with angry respectability at this remark.

"Thankful, darling!" said Chloe.

The Duchess nearly fainted.

"I am sick of them; and, besides, I look ever so much better without them."

At this point her Grace was on the point of forgetting her own somewhat equivocal situation, of bursting out of the mushroom-house, and taking to the open country, where her ears could not be defiled with such terrible revelations. Recollecting herself, however, just in time, she clapped her hands to her ears and endeavoured not

to hear another word. In this effort she was successful, for when Chloe spoke again the words sounded but a blurred and distant murmur.

"I long for my darling petticoats," said Chloe, "and for my—my—"

"Your darling Huskinson," said Mrs. Verulam.

"Hush, Daisy!"

"Is n't it true?"

"I do n't know. Perhaps, when I see him, I—but he may have gone back to America. He may—ah! ah! ah!"

She suddenly cried out at the very top of her voice, sprang up like one distraught, and grew as pale as a sheet of paper. Mrs. Verulam was seriously startled.

"What is it? What is the matter?" she exclaimed.

"There—there!" shrieked Chloe, pointing with a trembling finger to a remote part of the garden.

"Where? What? Is it a serpent? Is it a monster?"

"Boswell!" cried Chloe—"Boswell! Oh, if he sees me in these—oh! oh! Daisy, come—come!" and dragging the amazed Mrs. Verulam with her, she sprang across the garden, and darted into the paragon's house without so much as knocking at the door.

"They've a-gone inside. Darn it all!" remarked Mr. Minnidick to Mr. Bush among the sprouts.

The paragon made no reply, but went on digging in a heavy and almost soporific manner. His calm was so great, so apparently complete, that it nearly attained to majesty. The sphinx could not have gardened with a greater detachment in worlds before the sun and before the birth of Time.

Glancing from Mr. Minnidick's attic-window, Mrs. Verulam saw him, and cried out in wild astonishment:

"Chloe, there's Mr. Bush! How can he have got here?"

"I see him," said Chloe. "It does n't matter. The point is that there's Boswell! There he is—no, not there; more to the left. Now, do n't you see him?"

Mrs. Verulam followed her fluttering indication, and perceived a good-sized monkey, with a peculiarly plain and missing-link sort of face seated upon a red geranium and devouring a very satisfying white rose.

"Is n't he lovely?" continued Chloe. "Is n't he a perfect specimen?"

"Of monkey beauty, no doubt, dear. But—"

"Oh, if he had seen me in those horrible trousers I should have died!" exclaimed Chloe, burying her hot face on Mrs. Verulam's shoulder.

"Are American monkeys really so dreadfully particular?"

"Not Boswell. Huskinson! He must be here. Boswell and he are like brothers."

"Not in appearance, I hope, Chloe?"

"Oh, no—no; but in feeling. Huskinson must be close by. What shall I do?—what shall I do?"

"Keep quiet, and escape as soon as possible to the Elephant and Drum. Oh, there's a man—"

"Huskinson! Hide me! hide me! Let me get into a cupboard, or—"

"Two men coming up the road."

"Do n't say it's Bream! Daisy, for Heaven's sake, do n't—do n't say it's Bream!"

"Is n't Bream short?"

"A dwarf, with an immense beard and bow-legs! Is it? is it?"

"No; he has a beard."

"Then it is—it is! What shall I do?"

"But he's tall, and so is— Good Heavens!"

"What? what is it?"

"Good Heavens!" repeated Mrs. Verulam, falling back from the window as pale as death.

"It is Bream! I knew it! It is Bream!"

"The Duke and Mr. Rodney!" whispered Mrs. Verulam.

Chloe was dumb with mingled relief and surprise.

"It can't—they can't—"

"It is. They are."

It was. They were. Carrying several hoes, they reached the wicket-gate, and advanced into the garden of the paragon.

The Duchess, aware of the flight of Mrs. Verulam and Chloe, was just opening the small door of the mushroom-house in the hope of making good her escape, when, to her horror, she heard the voice of her lawful husband say: "I shall kill him without a doubt."

A second voice, which she also knew too well, replied in a trembling manner:

"Indeed, I fervently hope so, Duke—I fervently hope so. Still, we can never tell in these matters. A false step, the breaking of a hoe at a critical juncture, and—you have made your will I hope?"

The voices stood still at the very door of the mushroom-house, and the Duke said:

"By Jove!"

"I beg your pardon, Duke?"

"By Jove! It's lucky you reminded me. Rodney, have you a sheet of paper?"

"A sheet of paper?"

"Only a scrap. Enough for me to disinherit that false woman upon—and a pencil."

The Duchess, with difficulty, repressed an outcry as she sank down upon a superb specimen of the Black Marsh mushroom.

"I think so, Duke. I have half an envelope."

"Enough. Give it me."

"But—let me intercede—"

"Not a word. How do you spell 'testament'?"

"With two t's—no, three."

"I know that. Do n't be a fool. Is it 'tement' or 'toment?'"

"The latter, I think, I fancy—or the former, one of the two most certainly."

"Of course it's one of the two. But which? It do n't matter. There! If I fall, she's a pauper. That's something."

It was indeed something to the poor lady among the dibble-holes.

"Take charge of that, Rodney."

"Certainly, Duke. Now I see the word written I fancy it may possibly be 'tament.'"

"It do n't matter. When a man's going to fight to the death to revenge his honour one vowel's as good as another."

They advanced toward the bed of sprouts.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE INNOCENT LADY

The paragon took no notice whatever of their approach. With an immovable countenance and half-shut eyes, he continued to jab his spade into the mould, lift it out, throw the excavated earth to either side of him, knock any lumps that there chanced to be to pieces, level the surface, and jab the spade in again with mechanical regularity, while Mr. Minnidick hoed in silence at his side, munching the air without cessation. Beyond the hedge the boy with the sharply-pointed nose lay back in the basket-work chaise wrapped in a seraph's slumber, while the white pony nibbled hedgerow grass contentedly in the sunshine. It was upon this exquisitely peaceful and divinely rustic scene that the ruthless Duke now murderously advanced, carrying a hoe in each hand, and attended by the agitated owner of Mitching Dean, who endeavoured to assume the expression of a fanatic, while his gait suggested abject fear tempered by creeping paralysis. Such, however, is the influence of supreme intrepidity upon the soul of man, that even the Duke stopped short on arriving at the sprouts, and gazed for a moment in astonished silence at Mrs. Verulam's idea of Agag thus pursuing the chosen vocation of his existence upon the very edge of the tomb. The rattle of the falling earth would have recalled to a coward soul the sad music that accompanies the burial of

even the bravest. But Mr. Bush's nerves were surely made of steel. He did not glance aside. He did not flutter so much as an eyelid, conscious though he was of the Duchess crouching among his mushrooms, and of the infuriated husband waiting for him with the most formidable hoe that the resources of the Elephant and Drum could afford. In fact, he rather suggested an unusually heavy and lethargic person on the verge of slumber than a desperate Don Juan on the point of being slain in a duel.

"Do n't you think," whispered Mr. Rodney in the Duke's ear—"do n't you think you'd better put it off for a few hours? It seems almost—almost indecent to—to kill a man when—when he 's laying out his—his garden."

"I intend to lay him out," returned the Duke. "Mr. Bush!"

The paragon calmly dug on.

"Mr. Bush!" repeated the Duke in a very loud voice. "Are you deaf, sir?—are you deaf and blind, sir?"

"Give over!" muttered the paragon, removing a root and dividing a pink worm into two parts, both of which hastened to places of comparative safety.

"How dare you speak to me like that, sir!" said the Duke. "How dare you do it, sir! Do you suppose that because you have me out here in the depths of the country you can intimidate me, sir?"

"Get along with you!" muttered the paragon, patting the earth on the head with majestic condescension.

The visage of the Duke became empurpled.

"I shall do nothing of the kind, sir!" he exclaimed. "Take a hoe, sir—take a hoe, and stand to your defence this instant!"

"For Heaven's sake, Duke, be calm!" cried Mr. Rodney. "Do n't make a scene!"

"Rodney," said his Grace, "you are an egregious ass! Take a hoe—do you hear me, sir?"

"Pull up them weeds, Jacob," said the paragon to Mr. Minnidick, "or they 'll choke the rhubub."

"Darn 'em!" rejoined Mr. Minnidick, composedly.

"And lay down a bit o' marl along the sparrowgrass."

Mr. Minnidick moved to carry out this last command.

"Lock her in—d' yer hear? Lock her in, and lose the key," whispered Mr. Bush, as Mr. Minnidick was moving off.

Mr. Minnidick munched violently and answered naught, but as he passed the mushroom-house he turned the key on the Duchess, who now believed that her last hour was indeed approaching. Now, Mr. Bush at all times found it difficult to moderate his voice, and even his whisper, as a rule, was powerful and sonorous. Consequently, the Duke heard what he said, and became even more violently enraged than before.

"Lock her in, d' you say, you villainous ruffian!" he exclaimed. "So you 've trapped some other wretched creature into your clutches, have you? You can't even stand by the partner of your guilt or stick to one criminal at a time! I dare say," his Grace added, turning sharply on Mr. Rodney—"I dare say that house is positively swarming with degraded females at this very moment."

And he pointed up at the windows of the Farm, from one of which the heads of Mrs. Verulam and Chloe abruptly disappeared.

"Swarming!" said Mr. Rodney, deprecatingly. "Oh, Duke, I scarcely think—the house, indeed, hardly appears to—to swarm. You may be in—in error. Take time—do pray take a little time to—to learn more of—"

"Rodney, I am not addressing myself to you!" said

his Grace, telling a fairly obvious lie. "I have nothing to say to you. My business is with this gentleman. Stop digging this moment, sir, or I shall not wait for you to fight. I shall kill you where you are gardening without further parley! Stop digging!"

At this juncture Mr. Minnidick calmly approached with the "bit o' marl."

"Where d' ye wish it a-laid?" he asked his master. "Darn it all! where d' ye wish it a-laid?"

"Along the sparrowgrass, I tell yer. And then get to mulchin'."

"Mulchin'!" said Mr. Minnidick, severely. "Whatever fur? Darn it all! mulchin' harbours the vermin—mulchin' harbours the vermin. It'll spile the dahlias, I tell ye!"

All this conversation, in which he had no part, and from which it seemed that he was almost insolently excluded, drove the Duke to the very top of his temper.

"Marl and mulching be damned!" he shouted in a passionate voice, and presenting one of the hoes which he carried, he seemed about to go for the paragon and slay him where he stood.

"Save yourself!" cried Mr. Rodney, while Mr. Bush moved backwards with a certain amount of lumbering agility.

"Rodney!" exclaimed his Grace, "how dare you interfere?"

"Duke, I am your second," said Mr. Rodney, pale as ashes, but plucking up a semblance of spirit. "I act for you at your own request. Fight it out like—like men, but do n't murder a gentleman in cold blood among his own vegetables."

"I'll murder him where I choose. Will you be killed

or will you fight?" the Duke exclaimed frantically to the paragon.

"I won't be a-killed," replied he sulkily.

"Then order your second to stop mulching or marling, or whatever the devil he 's doing over there. Come out on to the grass, and we 'll have it out fairly."

Mr. Bush scratched his head with his right thumb, looked sleepy, and then called out in a prodigious voice:

"Jacob! Jacob!"

"Darn it all, I hear ye!" retorted Mr. Minnidick, who was following some mysterious profession connected with manure in the middle distance. "What d' ye want a-now?"

"Give over, Jacob!"

Mr. Minnidick gave over, and stood idle with a bitter face.

"Come here, I tell yer!" continued Mr. Bush.

Mr. Minnidick came rheumatically.

"Well?" said the paragon to the Duke—"well?"

"Take your hoe and follow me, sir," said the Duke, and he marched in grim silence to a plot of grass adjacent to the mushroom-house, slowly followed by the rest of the party.

"Chloe, what are they going to do?" said Mrs. Verulam anxiously in Mr. Minnidick's attic. "What are those horrid looking weapons for? And why is the Duke so angry?"

"I expect Mr. Bush is going to show them how he gardens," said Chloe. "They will see Boswell in a moment. He 's just eating a stock. Oh, how shall I manage to change my trousers before Huskinson sees me?"

"But people do n't garden on a lawn, do they?"

"Oh, yes, anywhere."

"Well, but what's the Duke doing now? He's measuring the ground with a pocket-handkerchief."

"Oh, that's for drillings, I expect."

"Drillings! But they're none of them in the army."

"I mean making drills for sowing."

"Would a Duke sow in summer?"

"He might. One can never tell what a man will do."

"No, indeed! How Mr. Rodney is trembling! And what an extraordinary state his hat is in!"

"I suppose it's his gardening hat. I am sure Boswell will be ill if he mixes his plants like that. And if he's ill Huskinson will go crazy."

"Now Mr. Rodney is handing Mr. Bush a spade. No, it's something else. What is it?"

"A flail, perhaps, or a spud."

"How they are talking now! I wish I could hear what they're saying. I am certain the Duke's in a passion. Look how he shakes his head and clenches his fist. He's lifting his spud now just as if he were going to hit Mr. Bush. Ah, Chloe, I'm frightened!"

So was the paragon, who was considering where he could run away to, when the duel was stayed for a moment by Mr. Minnidick, who suddenly said:

"Darn it all! look at that there monkey a-feedin' on them there pansies!"

At this speech the duelling party assumed attitudes of distinct surprise, and Mr. Rodney said nervously:

"A moment, Duke—a moment, I beg! What do you say is eating pansies?"

"That there monkey—darn it all!" replied Mr. Minnidick, pointing to Boswell with the favourite hoe.

"I will not be interrupted by any monkey!" exclaimed

the Duke angrily. "No doubt it has been purposely introduced to balk me of my vengeance. Rodney, it was your business, as my second, to clear the ground."

"I—really I—I must positively decline to clear the—ground of monkeys," said Mr. Rodney, driven to bay at last. "I am ready to—to do anything in—in reason, but I have never been accustomed to handle wild animals, and—no, Duke, I will not begin now at my age—no, not even to oblige you."

And he endeavoured to look dignified and firm.

"Very well, then," cried the Duke. "Then I shall act for myself, since my friend deserts me."

And, with this unmerited accusation, he furiously made towards Boswell with his hoe.

"Oh, Daisy," cried Chloe in the attic—"oh, the Duke is going to kill Boswell—the brute! Oh, it will break Huskinson's heart! What shall I do—oh, what shall I do?"

And she leaned out of the attic window till she nearly fell into the garden of the paragon.

"Chloe, for Heaven's sake, don't! You will be seen. They will see you!"

"I don't care. Let them! There! He's struck at Boswell. He's hit him! Oh, oh! No, Boswell dodged just in time! Now the Duke—oh, he's climbed up a rose-tree!"

"The Duke! Get out of the way, Chloe! Let me see!"

"And now he's coming down head first!"

"What will the Duchess say? And he used to be a Cabinet Minister!"

"He *is* agile! I never saw anything go so quick. He's making for the shrubbery now on all fours!"

"Chloe, I will see him doing it. Make room for me at once!"

"He's up an acacia! Oh, oh! And now he's jumped into an elm!"

"He'll be killed! No Duke can go on so without being killed."

"The Duke! Don't be so absurd! It's Boswell! He's got away! He's escaped! Heaven be praised! He's got away! How thankful Huskinson will be! The Duke's returning. He's all over green stuff, and foaming at the mouth. I'm glad of it—cruel wretch, to hunt an innocent little monkey so!"

At this point in the panorama Mrs. Verulam forced her way to the window and beheld his Grace, in the very extremity of baffled fury, cursing and swearing at the pitch of his voice, returning to the duelling party, who had been attentively observing his endeavours to clear the ground of monkeys from the shadow of the mushroom-house—in which, by the way, the Duchess was now beginning steadily to suffocate. The noise occasioned by the chase of Boswell had awakened the boy with the sharply-pointed nose from his seraph's slumber, and, anxious to join in the larks that seemed going forward, he now proceeded to swarm over the hedge, and joined the group on the lawn just as his Grace returned to it, and, with many oaths, assumed a posture of attack and presented his hoe at Mr. Bush.

"Come on!" cried the Duke. "Your blasted monkeys shan't save you! Come on!"

The paragon honestly believed that his last hour on earth had now arrived, when another providential interruption took place.

"Heip!" cried a feeble, failing bass voice. "Help! Murder! murder!"

"Whatever's that?" said Mr. Rodney, endeavouring to turn paler, but failing, since Providence has made

no provision of any colour whiter than chalk. "What is it?"

"Help, help!" repeated the bass voice with a fainter accent.

"Crikey!" cried the boy with the sharply-pointed nose, making use of the emblematic word of extreme childhood—"crikey! if it is n't the innercent lydy stifling! My eye! what a lark!"

And he gave free vent to the very natural sense of humour roused in his youthful breast by so auspicious an occurrence. Now, the Duke was nothing if not chivalrous, and, on hearing the small boy's cheerful pronouncement, he exclaimed in a voice of thunder:

"An innocent lady stifling! Where—where is she?"

The boy with the sharply-pointed nose was unable to speak for laughing, but he indicated the mushroom-house with one hand, which he removed for the purpose from his little right knee, on which he had placed it as an assistance to his timely mirth.

"In there! An innocent lady in such a hole as that!" cried the Duke. "You scoundrel!"

And seizing the paragon by the throat, he shook him to and fro a dozen times or more, and then, throwing him aside, sprang to the door of the mushroom-house and endeavoured to tear it open.

"It's locked! It's bolted! Where's the key? Rodney, why do n't you fetch the key?"

"Because I do n't know where it is!" cried the miserable owner of Mitching Dean.

"And you call yourself a man!" roared the Duke. "She'll be dead in another minute!"

And he shook the door furiously.

"Try your hoe, Duke—try your hoe!" cried Mr. Rodney.

"By Jove! I will!"

And so saying, he tried it with such skill, address, and physical strength that the door gave way, and he beheld his Duchess in the early Victorian dressing-gown fainting upon the dibble-holes.

"Cleopatra!" he cried, and stood as if changed to stone.

But this was only for a moment. He turned. The paragon saw the movement, and fled for his life. Across the garden he moved with the speed and noise of a fire-engine. He gained the house. He leaped up the narrow stairs. He plunged into the inmost recess of the building, which chanced to be Mr. Minnidick's attic.

"Get out o' ther way!" he roared to Chloe and Mrs. Verulam, "or I 'll throw yer out o' the winder!"

"Really, Mr. Bush—" began Mrs. Verulam.

"'Really, Mr. Bush,' be blasted!" he roared, and flinging himself upon the ground with a noise like thunder, he endeavoured to conceal himself beneath the truckle-bed of his retainer.

But the paragon was large and the truckle-bed was small, and as the less cannot contain the greater, Mr. Bush's situation when the Duke bounded into the chamber was merely that of the ostrich. His head, it is true, was concealed from sight, but the whole of his gigantic body was visible and to be got at. The Duke got at it, and despite Mrs. Verulam's cries of alarm, rolled it down the staircase into the garden, just as a large bus, containing the Bun Emperor, Mr. Harrison, the four remaining detectives, and four police-constables in full uniform, their truncheons drawn in their hands, drove up to the wicket-gate.

"Help!" roared Mr. Bush, while Mr. Rodney leaned up against the mushroom-house half dead with terror at

the vision of Mrs. Verulam and the orange-grower fluttering forth from the paragon's abode. "Help!"

"There's your man—oh indeed; most certainly; by all means—there he lies!" cried Mr. Harrison to the police-constables, pointing to Mr. Bush.

"Arrest him! arrest him!" shouted the Bun Emperor. "Take my property from him!"

The constables pulled the Duke off the paragon.

"Let me kill him!" said his Grace. "Let me kill the scoundrel!"

"Not till he's been hanged for stealing my property!" shouted the Emperor, ablaze with passion.

"For Heaven's sake, don't make a scene before the ladies!" shrieked Mr. Rodney.

"Rely on me—oh, indeed, most certainly, in all circumstances rely on me!" cried Mr. Harrison, doing nothing, with starting eyes.

The police stood firm. They planted the paragon on his feet, held him by the scruff of his neck, turned out his pockets, and revealed the silver whisky-bottle and the gold presentation cigar-case.

"What did I say?" cried Mr. Harrison—"what did I say at all times and ever say? Oh, indeed!"

Nobody seemed to know or care, and at this moment attention was diverted by the appearance of the Duchess from the mushroom-house and the faithful Marriner from the wicket-gate. The Duchess tottered feebly forward, grasping the early Victorian dressing-gown with both hands.

"Crikey!" cried the boy with the sharply-pointed nose; "it's the innercent lady! She ain't stifled!"

And he nearly dropped with childish disappointment.

"Yes," bellowed her Grace, "I am an innocent lady.

Oh, Southborough!" And she proceeded to explain the cause of her situation. "He would n't speak for me. He fled—the base one fled!" she shouted pathetically, pointing at the paragon. "He's not a man!"

"No more am I!" cried Chloe, who had been engaged in whispering with the faithful Marriner, and who now came forward blushing very much and trying to look very composed.

"Chloe!" said Mrs. Verulam.

"Daisy, it's all up! Huskinson knows everything, and is just coming up the road. He traced me to Park Lane, and Francis has told him all. He is staying at the Elephant and Drum, and met Marriner by chance. He forgives me. And I trust you will," she added, turning to the Duke and Duchess.

They listened to her succeeding remarks with dropped jaws.

"This gentleman a lady!" cried Mr. Rodney, pressing his hand to his heart, and sitting down in a bed of stinging-nettles.

"This man a woman!" shrieked the Duchess. "But then," she added, staring at Mrs. Verulam, "you—you are—"

"Respectable," said Mrs. Verulam, with a rather malicious intonation.

"Mr. Van Adam a female!" her Grace reiterated. "But—but—Pearl—I shall have to afford to send her to Carlsbad this summer, after all, unless Mr. Ingerstall—" She paused abruptly. "Southborough," she cried, "come away!"

And she led off the astounded Duke to the pony-carriage, made him get into it, and drove away with him, followed by the boy with the sharply-pointed nose, who

ran vociferously behind, objurgating those who thus usurped his position of coachman at the top of his shrill treble voice.

Meanwhile Mrs. Verulam had begged off the paragon, for the Bun Emperor, on being confronted with a pretty woman almost in tears, developed unexpected susceptibilities, and became almost polite.

"Let him go, Mr. Harrison," said the Emperor to the groom of the chambers, who was nowhere near Mr. Bush—"let the ruffian go!"

"Rely on me, sir," was the groom of the chambers' apt reply.

"We do, Mr. Harrison, we do. Me and Mrs. Lite is not insensible of your services."

The groom of the chambers inclined himself and stepped into the bus, to which he was shortly followed by the detectives, the constables, and the Emperor, who said to Mrs. Verulam, in parting:

"Frederick is picking the bullets"—Miss Bindler's—"out of the palace walls, ma'am. When this is done, me and Mrs. Lite should be obliged if we could return to the home. Your time is nearly up."

"I consider it quite up," said Mrs. Verulam, who had no very pleasant recollections of Ribton Marches. "Pray, return whenever you please."

The Emperor drove away in high feather, after excusing himself to Mr. Rodney for breaking his word, and breaking out of the fishing cottage. The paragon and Mr. Minnidick had now returned to their interrupted avocations. Mr. Bush was sulkily digging among the sprouts. Mr. Minnidick was busy with the mulching and the marl. Mrs. Verulam looked towards her idea of Agag.

"I suppose I ought to say good-bye to him," she said, rather tremulously.

"To a thief and a coward!" murmured Mr. Rodney, in a reproachful, and yet tender tone.

"To a man who wanted to throw you out of the window!" said Chloe.

"He was my guest and my hero."

"Very well."

Mrs. Verulam advanced to the bed of sprouts.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bush," she said.

The paragon turned up a worm.

"Mr. Bush, good-bye."

"Jacob!" called the paragon.

"Darn it all, I hear ye!" piped Mr. Minnidick.
"What d' ye want a-now?"

"Get to dressin' the earth round them hornbeam hedges with soap-ash. D' yer hear?"

Mrs. Verulam turned away and took Mr. Rodney's arm.

"You will not leave society?" he whispered. "You will not take to these horrible pursuits?"

"Perhaps—perhaps not. I must think. I must ponder."

"Come and ponder at Mitching Dean."

She smiled at him. They joined Chloe and the faithful Marriner. Chloe had just run to the corner of the lane.

"He 's coming, Daisy!" she whispered excitedly.
"I 've seen him in the distance. He 's coming. Boswell is sitting on his shoulder. Oh, oh!"

"Dear Chloe!" said Mrs. Verulam. "And society?"

"I 've had enough of it. I only want Florida and—and him. And you, Daisy?"

"I 'm not particularly anxious for Florida."

And again she smiled at Mr. Rodney.

"Ma'am," said the faithful Marriner to Mrs. Verulam, "might I speak?"

"Certainly, Marriner. What is it?"

"With your permission, ma'am, I desire to enter matrimony."

"Indeed! With Francis, I suppose?"

"No, ma'am; with Mr. Harrison."

"Who is that?"

"The gentleman in the bus with the bald head, ma'am."

"Oh!"

"I feel that I can rely upon him, ma'am," said the faithful Marriner.

THE END.

